

2025-26 NBA PREVIEW

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The Lakers' Two-Headed Monster

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Durant Wants
One More Ring

PLUS

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EDITOR'S LETTER

Back in the 1990s, I was a big Houston Rockets fan. I always resisted efforts by Michael Jordan acolytes to add asterisks to the Rockets' back-to-back titles in 1993-94 and '94-95, a period marked by Jordan's temporary absence from the Chicago Bulls. Those Rockets teams earned their spot in NBA lore with two gritty, hard-nosed championship runs.

But as the Rockets learned, once you get to the mountaintop, it's tough to stay there. And once you've fallen from your perch, it's tough to get back, even when you take bold steps to do so.

Spoiled by their two-season reign, the Rockets made a bold play to recapture the magic by trading four players for a 33-year-old Charles Barkley following the 1995-96 season. Barkley joined Hakeem Olajuwon and Clyde Drexler, giving the Rockets three of the "50 Greatest Players" in NBA history as chosen by the league. On paper, this looked like a championship team, and it frequently played like one, reaching the Western Conference finals in 1997. But a six-game loss to the Utah Jazz — due in part to a Barkley injury — deprived the NBA of a Finals matchup between its six most recent champions.

Still clinging to hope, the Rockets doubled down on their superstar strategy, addressing Drexler's retirement by adding Scottie Pippen in a sign-and-trade ahead of the 1999 lockout season. But the stars failed to align; Pippen and Barkley didn't mesh, and Pippen was gone after a first-round playoff loss. Houston hasn't been to an NBA Finals since hoisting the trophy in 1995.

My point with this history lesson? A past-his-prime superstar isn't always the missing piece to a championship puzzle. And that brings me to a compelling storyline that we spotlight in our 2025-26 NBA preview.

With their acquisition of two-time champion and living NBA legend Kevin Durant, can this year's Rockets team return to the Promised Land? Durant turns 37 in late September, and the end is in sight for this future first-ballot Hall of Famer. But KD is still producing at an elite level — maybe elite enough to yield a third ring. In Marc Stein's feature story "KD's Last Stand" on p. 20 of this year's magazine, we take a hard look at Durant's burning desire to go out on his terms — as a champion.

Speaking of legends in new surroundings, Luka Dončić embarks on his first full season with LeBron James and the Los Angeles Lakers. Will Luka play Pippen to LeBron's Jordan (or vice versa, for that matter) and propel L.A. to its 18th NBA title? In his feature "Two-Headed Monster," on p. 16, Mark Medina analyzes this unlikely marriage. Can Luka and LeBron set aside personal agendas to focus on their shared goal of a championship?

The Rockets and Lakers, and their respective superstars, are providing two of the truly fascinating subplots (see "15 Things to Watch" on p. 24) of what should be another NBA season brimming with intrigue. It's what made this magazine so fun to put together. Whether you're a Rockets booster, a Lakers lifer or a fan of one of the other 28 franchises, our knowledgeable roster of NBA insiders has got you covered.

Enjoy the magazine, and enjoy the season.

Rob Doster

ROB DOSTER, MANAGING EDITOR



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BRINGING THE THUNDER

Alex Caruso gave the Oklahoma City Thunder a Game 7 spark as the Thunder earned the franchise's first NBA title since its Seattle days with a clinching 103-91 victory over the Indiana Pacers in front of an electric Paycom Center crowd.

Photos by (from left):
Kyle Terada-Imagn Images
Alonzo Adams-Imagn Images





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HOOPS

MADNESS

BY MARC STEIN

THE BEST STORY IN PRO BASKETBALL

The Detroit Pistons had the NBA's 14th-best record last season at 44-38.

Doesn't sound all that impressive until you remember that they won only 14 games — total — during the 2023-24 season. Those Pistons, you'll remember, lost a league-record 28 games in a row during one stretch.

So, yeah. From 14-68 to 14th-best adds up to storybook in this case.

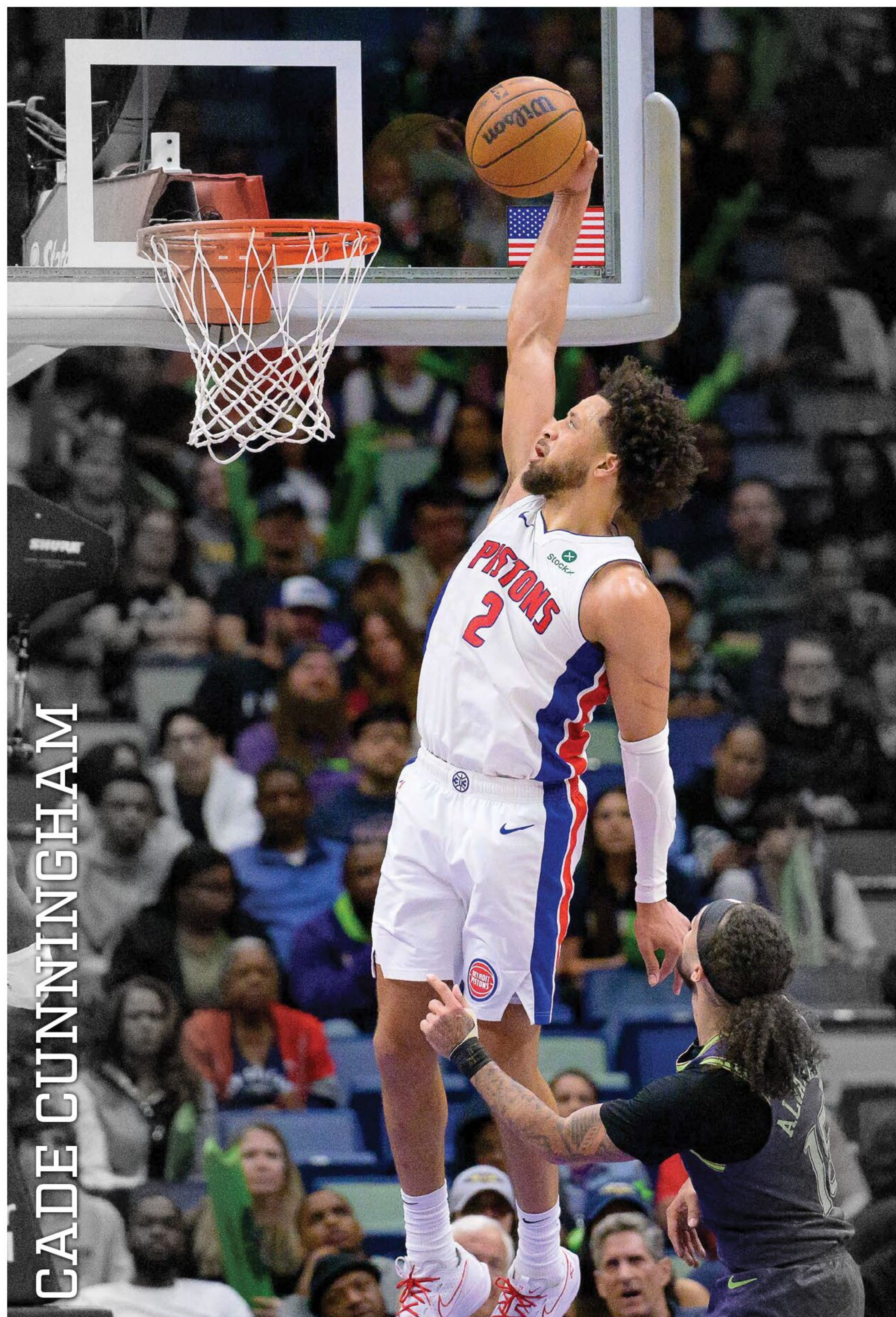
No joke. The Pistons rebounded from a 14-68 record and a tumble as far down the draft lottery board as they could fall with the league's worst record — from dreams of No. 1 overall to the fifth pick in the 2024 draft — to emerge as the league's 2024-25 darlings.

They also went on to play the Jalen Brunson-led Knicks very evenly in a first-round series that went six games and featured Detroit's first win in a playoff game since (whoa) May 2008. Cade Cunningham broke through as both an All-Star and All-NBA selection after years of fears that he might not live up to the expectations Detroit had placed on him when it made him the league's No. 1 overall pick in 2021.

The Cleveland Cavaliers jumped out to a 15-0 start last season that had many pundits believing that Kenny Atkinson had the NBA's Coach of the Year trophy pretty much wrapped up by Thanksgiving. Atkinson did end up winning the COY race, but his closest competition — as predicted by absolutely no one — turned out to be the Pistons' J.B. Bickerstaff.

The same J.B. Bickerstaff who was fired by Cleveland in May 2024 to be replaced by Atkinson and emerge as an unexpected change agent in Motown.

Sometimes the real-life storylines in #thisleague turn out better than anything a script writer could have dreamed up.



CADE CUNNINGHAM



ANTHONY DAVIS
AND LUKA DONČIĆ

THE TRADE

The first six months of 2025 generated a level of transactional activity that the NBA had seemingly never witnessed before.

Recent All-Stars Jimmy Butler, De'Aaron Fox, Zach LaVine, Brandon Ingram and Khris Middleton were all dealt in February.

Then, Kevin Durant, Jrue Holiday, Kristaps Porziņģis, Desmond Bane, CJ McCollum, Jordan Poole, Michael Porter Jr. and Cameron Johnson all featured in trades that were hammered out in June.

And still, even after all of that landscape-changing business, you surely know exactly what we're talking about when we simply bring up "The Trade."

"Is that what we're calling it?" NBA commissioner Adam Silver asked at his annual press conference during All-Star Weekend, hav-

ing fielded a question that simply referred to "The Trade."

"Yes" is the answer. The Trade. What more needs to be said?

On Feb. 2, without warning, the Dallas Mavericks agreed to ship Luka Dončić to the Los Angeles Lakers (along with teammates Maxi Kleber and Markieff Morris) for Anthony Davis, Max Christie and one unprotected first-round pick in 2029.

The same Luka Dončić who was still just 25 at the time of the deal and had just led the Mavericks on an unexpected run to the 2024 NBA Finals that included playoff series triumphs over three 50-win teams (Los Angeles Clippers, Oklahoma City Thunder and Minnesota Timberwolves).

The Mavericks stunningly won the NBA's draft lottery in mid-May

with just a 1.8% chance to do so — earning the wholly unexpected privilege of drafting Cooper Flagg out of Duke with the No. 1 overall pick — but Dallas remains a city in shock as a new season dawns.

The locals' beloved face of the franchise got traded without warning to the Lakers of all teams in the middle of the season (and the middle of the night) on the weekend before last season's trade deadline. How long will it take for Mavsland to stop shaking?

There is no clear-cut answer yet. Not after so many Mavs fans came to regard Dončić as the heir to Dirk Nowitzki's kingdom after watching in 2018-19 as Nowitzki, in his 21st and final season as a Maverick, literally handed the proverbial torch to the Slovenian rookie.

THE SOUTHWORST?

Some of us are old school. Some of us still pay at least a little bit of attention to the NBA's divisional standings — even if they don't really mean much in the modern NBA.

So standings-obsessed old-schoolers like us couldn't help but pay attention to what was happening in the NBA's Southeast Division last season.

The Orlando Magic, for starters, won the division despite a season-long slew of injuries and a modest (to put it politely) record of 41-41.

The East is projected to be

so weak and injury-diluted this season that the Magic are now widely considered to be a top-three lock in the conference after trading for Desmond Bane.

All that said ...

Orlando's 2024-25 résumé was glittering compared to the rest of the Southeast. The composite winning percentage of its five teams last season — once the records of the Atlanta Hawks (40-42), Miami Heat (37-45), Charlotte Hornets (19-63) and Washington Wizards (18-64) were added in — looked like a Tony Gwynn batting

average: .378. According to research from The Associated Press' Tim Reynolds, that's the lowest single-season winning percentage for any division in NBA history. The previous low was a .381 mark for the Central Division in 1970-71 — when Cleveland was an expansion team.

The Hornets, by the way, hold the league's longest active playoff drought at nine seasons and counting. A ray of positivity did break through, though, in July: Charlotte won the NBA's Las Vegas Summer League championship for the first time.

23

No NBA player has ever played into a 23rd season. Surely it doesn't surprise you that the Los Angeles Lakers' No. 23 will be the first.

LeBron

James is currently tied with Vince Carter in terms of seasonal longevity at 22 seasons logged in the NBA. James will break that tie with Carter this season and, with his 50th game played in 2025-26, will reach 1,612 regular-season games played and pass Robert Parish for the top spot on that page of the record book to pair with his relatively newfound status as the NBA's all-time leading scorer.

The working assumption in numerous rival front offices is that, yes, James will be doing all of that in a Lakers uniform this season even though he suddenly possesses a \$52.6 million expiring contract. As of press time, James had not asked for a trade or a buyout and, given his significant salary as well as the full no-trade clause he possesses, would be very difficult to trade even if he and the Lakers were working in concert to go that route.

James also celebrates his 41st birthday on Dec. 30. The oldest player in NBA history is Nat Hickey, who played two games as player/coach for the Providence Steamers in 1947-48 at 46, so there's at least one record that seems out of reach for LeBron.

Everything else? Stay tuned.

LEBRON JAMES

TRIVIA TIME

JONAS VALANČIŪNAS

Question: Can you name the one NBA player who has appeared in every edition of the NBA's Play-In Tournament prior to the playoffs?

Answer: It's the same guy who had the Denver Nuggets and perennial EuroLeague power Panathinaikos of Greece fighting over his services during the summer.

It's true: Bruising center Jonas Valančiūnas appeared in play-in games with the Memphis Grizzlies in 2020 and 2021, with the New Orleans Pelicans in 2022, 2023 and 2024 and with the Sacramento Kings last season.

Yet he was in the news for entirely different reasons for several days in July. The Kings agreed to trade Valančiūnas to Denver for Dario Šarić, seemingly filling the Nuggets' longstanding need for a reliable backup to All-World center Nikola Jokić, but there was a hitch: Valančiūnas, now 33, was also being chased aggressively by Panathinaikos to leave the NBA after 13 seasons in the States.

The saga seemed to drag out for days while the Nuggets waited for clearance to officially complete the agreed-to trade with the Kings, but that gave them plenty of time to convey to Valančiūnas — before he was officially a Nugget — that they had no intention of letting him out of his NBA deal. Valančiūnas eventually announced that he indeed intended to honor the final guaranteed season on his current contract and report to Denver for training camp come late September.

This might prove to be Valančiūnas' final NBA season, given that his contract is not guaranteed for the 2026-27 season and with Panathinaikos widely expected to make another run at him next summer. Maybe the safest projection to make here, however, is that we've seen the last of Valančiūnas in the PIT. Something would have to go seriously wrong in Denver for the Jokić-led Nuggets to fall that far down the West standings — and Panathinaikos certainly won't be a play-in team any time soon.

“
**NO PRESSURE ...
WE'RE ALL
GOING TO BE
DEAD SOON
AND IT REALLY
DOESN'T
MATTER
ANY MORE.**



JOE MAZZULLA

LIFE OR DEATH?

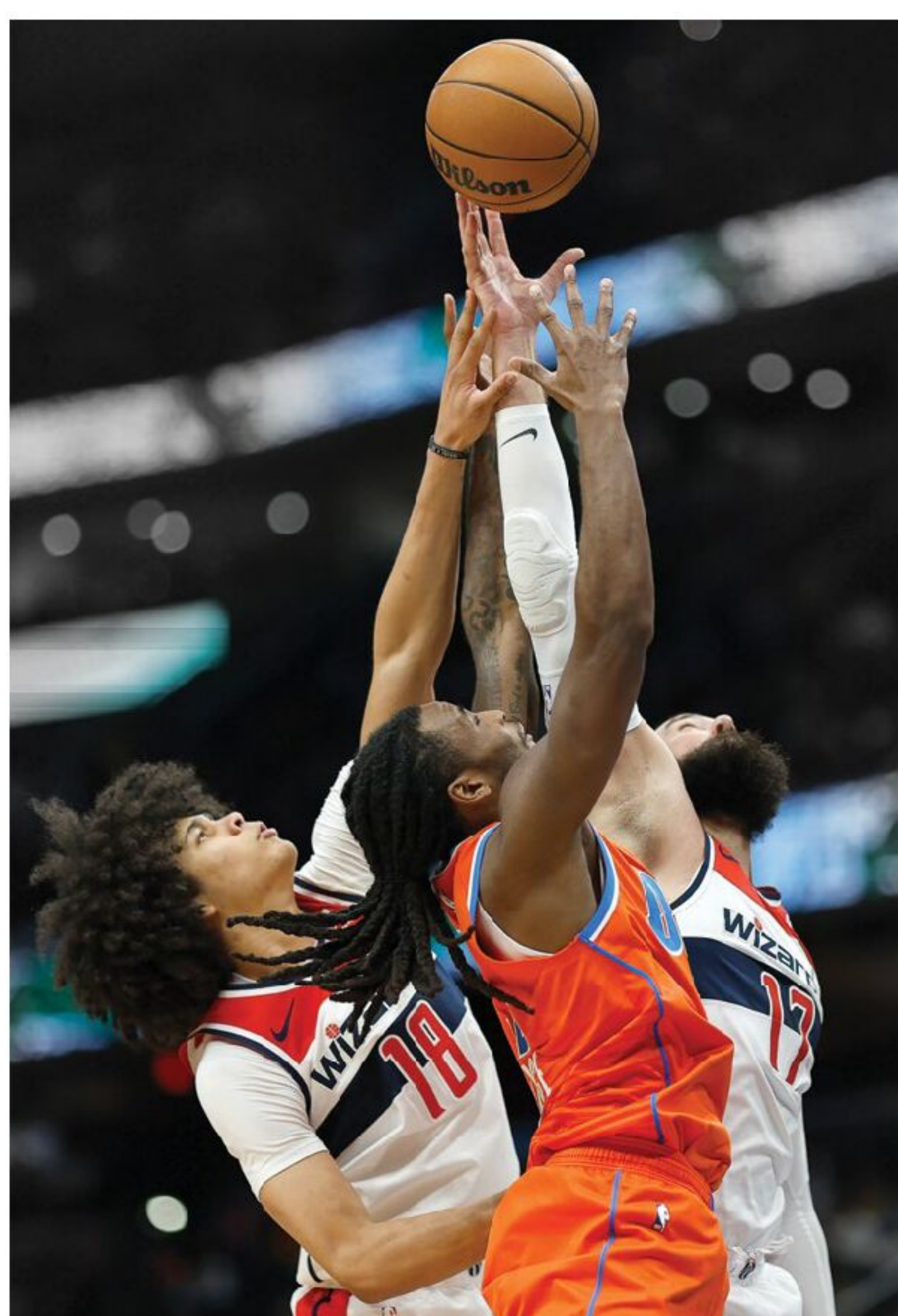
“No pressure ... we’re all going to be dead soon and it really doesn’t matter anymore.”

One of the most memorable quotes of the 2024-25 season was actually uncorked on the eve of the regular season. It came from Boston Celtics head coach Joe Mazzulla, ever the contrarian, when reporters asked him before Boston’s Ring Night rout of the New York Knicks if his team was already feeling the weight of its title defense.

Mazzulla didn’t stop with that line about death, either. “You’re either going to win or you’re not,” he said. “And when you win, you try to forget about it a week later. And when you lose, you try to forget about it a week later. It’s not pressure. It’s an opportunity.”

“I just don’t look at it as pressure. ... We don’t have pressure. If we lose, we’re not losing our life. We’re not surgeons. We’re not in the military. We coach basketball for a living.”

Little did Mazzulla know at the time what was awaiting the reigning champions in the playoffs. Jayson Tatum sustained an Achilles tear in Game 4 of the Celtics’ second-round loss to New York, which ultimately convinced Celtics management to trade away Jrue Holiday and Kristaps Porziņģis in June to aggressively slash Boston’s luxury tax bill in anticipation of Tatum missing all (or at least most) of the 2025-26 season.



OPPOSITE ENDS OF THE SPECTRUM

How can we get the 68-win champions from Oklahoma City into the same thought bubble as last season’s 18-64 Washington Wizards?

Watch us!

Thanks to some helpful research assistance from our good friends at Basketball Reference, we recently discovered that last season’s Thunder were only the fourth team in league history to outscore the opposition by 1,000 points over the course of the season (+1,055), joining some rather heady company.

The only other three teams on the list are the 69-13 Los Angeles Lakers in 1971-72 (+1,007), the 66-16 Milwaukee Bucks in 1970-71 (+1,005) and the 72-10 Chicago Bulls in 1995-96 (+1,004).

As for the Wiz?

While the Thunder were rampaging all season, Washington was becoming just the second team in NBA annals to be outscored by a total of 1,000 points in a single season (-1,020). The only other team in that dreaded club is the 1992-93 Dallas Mavericks, who went 11-71 and got outscored by a whopping 1,246 points.

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TAYLOR JENKINS

MICHAEL MALONE

JOB

INSECURITY

Golden State's Steve Kerr has always explained it as well as anyone in his profession.

The reason NBA coaches are so well-compensated, Kerr likes to say, is because they've signed up to deal with the incessant external noise about their teams and, ultimately, shoulder the bulk of the blame when things go awry.

The 2024-25 NBA season, however, was tougher than we've ever seen on coaches. Historically brutal, in fact.

Late-season firings are hardly new, but teams with winning records firing their coach with fewer than 10 games to go before the playoffs had never happened until last season — when we actually somehow saw it happen twice.

First: The Memphis Grizzlies

canned Taylor Jenkins with nine games left on the regular-season schedule.

Then the Nuggets, apparently unwilling to be outdone, fired both coach Michael Malone and general manager Calvin Booth just 11 days later — and with three games to go in Denver's season.

The only previous comparable situation that our research unearthed occurred late in 1982-83, when the New Jersey Nets essentially axed Larry Brown despite his 47-29 record because then-Nets owner Joe Taub discovered that Brown was plotting to leave for the University of Kansas and a return to the college game. However ...

According to both *The New York Times* and Basketball Reference, Brown's exit from the Nets with six

games to go was recorded as a resignation rather than a firing. That tale thus has to be woven into this history lesson, but Jenkins and Malone went down as outright firings.

Just to be thorough, we must note that Cleveland, in LeBron James' second NBA season, dismissed the highly respected Paul Silas in March 2005 with 18 games to go in the regular season and the Cavaliers at 34-30. Those Cavs wound up narrowly missing the playoffs at 42-40 after going 8-10 under their interim coach: Michael Malone's father Brendan Malone.

Otherwise? Every single NBA coach fired with 15 games or fewer remaining in the regular season, based on all available research, got dumped by a team with a losing record.



TOO MUCH WINNING?

Are multiple extended winning streaks in the same season actually a bad omen? Cleveland can certainly make that case.

The Cavaliers shocked the NBA by winning their first 15 games last season. They also later reeled off runs of 16 consecutive wins and another winning streak that lasted for 12 games.

None of that streaking, though, did Cleveland any good once the playoffs began. The Eastern Conference's Team of the Season was reduced to the Team of the Regular Season in a humbling five-game exit courtesy of the Indiana Pacers in Round 2 of the postseason.

Only one other team in NBA history, for the record, managed three winning streaks that spanned 12 games or more before the **Donovan Mitchell**-led Cavaliers did it.

That would be the 2006-07 Dallas Mavericks — who infamously went 67-15 after a devastating fall-from-ahead loss to Miami in the 2006 NBA Finals before they crashed out of the first round of the 2007 playoffs to the eighth-seeded We Believe Warriors.

“
NO
CLASS.
NO
BALLS.”

QUOTEBOARD

“No class. No balls.”

Michael Malone was still the coach of the Denver Nuggets in December when he uncorked one of the lines of the season. Asked to react to the Sacramento's abrupt decision to fire Mike Brown — mere months after the Kings gave him a contract extension — it was Malone who revealed to the world that the Kings dumped Brown on Dec. 27 only after he ran a morning practice ... and after he met with the media ... and not until the NBA's 2022-23 Coach of the Year was driving to the airport for the team's afternoon flight to Los Angeles.

Malone was uniquely qualified to discuss Brown's dismissal, since Kings owner Vivek Ranadivé had ousted Malone in December 2014. Of course, less than four months later, Denver dismissed Malone in perhaps even more stunning fashion with just three games to go in the regular season.

HOME IS WHERE THE MEDIOCRITY IS

Those of us who came of age as NBA fans in the 1980s learned to expect the home team to win at least 60% of the time.

Furthermore, throughout the 1980s, there were five separate seasons in which the league's composite winning percentage for home teams was a robust .654 or higher.

The 2020s are a much different time.

In this era of bombs-away shooting from deep that can wipe away double-digit deficits like they never existed, homecourt advantage just isn't what it used to be.

How do we know? Home teams registered a composite winning percentage of just .544 during the 2024-25 season. It was the fourth time in the past five seasons that the leaguewide success rate for home teams landed in the .540s.

And those four seasons, in case you were wondering, rank as the worst four seasons for home teams in NBA history.

The specifics via Basketball Reference:

2023-24: 668-562 (.543)

2024-25: 669-561 (.544)

2021-22: 669-561 (.544)

2020-21: 587-493 (.544)

The trend actually carried over to the playoffs, too, when we saw the road team stunningly win a combined seven games in a row in both conferences in the second round.

Road teams were actually 12-6 in Round 2 until home teams finally remembered where they were playing and won the final six games of the round.

In the NBA Finals, home teams were 2-2 through four games before winning the final three games of the series, including the Thunder's clinching Game 7 win.

JOEL EMBIID



TYRESE MAXEY

DEEP-SIXED

If you rewind just one summer, you will certainly recall that the Philadelphia 76ers were almost universally proclaimed champions of the 2024 NBA Offseason.

The Sixers signed Paul George away from the Los Angeles Clippers. They re-signed Tyrese Maxey to a max deal after convincing Maxey to hold off on extension talks for a full year so they would have the salary cap space to make a major move like signing George. They even found a way to bring in French Olympic star Guerschon Yabusele on a minimum deal after Yabusele unforgettably dunked on LeBron James during the Paris Games.

Alas ...

The Sixers learned the hard way that summertime praise and plaudits don't mean much once the season starts for real. Joel Embiid, George and Maxey all endured significant injury issues during their first season as a star trio, managing to appear in only 15 games together. Philly went 7-8 in those games.

The Sixers' health woes extended to first-year guard Jared McCain, who looked like Rookie of the Year material but sustained a season-ending knee injury of his own in December.

Things have to go better for the Sixers this season. Right?

That's surely what everyone in Philly wants to believe, but the Sixers' summer was filled with no shortage of uncertainty thanks to the considerable mystery that still surrounds Embiid's health and an arthroscopic knee procedure that George was forced to undergo in July.

CAN THE LOS ANGELES LAKERS

WIN AN NBA TITLE WITH LUKA DONČIĆ AND LEBRON JAMES?

— BY MARK MEDINA —

Nearly seven months after expressing his hopes of retiring as a Los Angeles Laker, LeBron James fueled uncertainty about his plans. Nearly four months after appearing shocked over the Dallas Mavericks dealing him to the Lakers, Luka Dončić pledged his allegiance to the purple and gold with a new extension.

Just as the Lakers secured their next superstar for the future, they also have wrestled with how to manage their two stars for the present.

Should the Lakers prioritize their long-term future with Dončić by maximizing roster depth, draft picks and cap space? Should the Lakers prioritize their short-term future with James by making win-now moves? With Dončić and James both under contract for the 2025-26 season, can the Lakers at least contend for an NBA title in the present?

“We have a great team. We have what we need to compete for a championship,” Dončić says. “I try to win every game no matter what. We have got some new, great guys on our team. You know we’re going to go for it.”

Dončić said those words on Aug. 2 at the Lakers’ practice facility after agreeing to a three-year, \$165 million extension that keeps him under contract through the 2027-28 season and makes him eligible in 2028 for a five-year extension worth more than \$360 million. Before that, Dončić recruited the Lakers’ free-agent targets, including a lob threat eager to redeem his career (Deandre Ayton) and a lockdown defender eager to improve his durability (Marcus Smart). Dončić looked slimmer after revamping his training regimen. He talked in a relaxed tone and wore a bright smile, a stark contrast to his subdued demeanor shortly after the Mavericks surprisingly dealt him to the Lakers just before last season’s trade deadline.

Rob Pelinka, Lakers general manager and vice president of basketball operations, sat next to Dončić while displaying enthusiastic body language. Pelinka called it a “monumental moment in Lakers history” for “the best young basketball player in the universe” to commit further to “the best sports franchise in the globe.”

Pelinka was speaking in front of an audience that included the Lakers’ governor (Jeanie Buss) and head coach (JJ Redick) and Dončić’s management team (business partner Lara Beath Seager, agent Bill Duffy). The audience also

“
I CAN PLAY
WITH ANYBODY,
AND I THINK HE
CAN AS WELL.
SO WE’LL WORK
WELL TOGETHER.

— LEBRON JAMES

TWO-HEADED



ADAM PANTOZZI/INBAE VIA GETTY IMAGES



featured several of Dončić's teammates, including Ayton, Smart, Rui Hachimura, Gabe Vincent, Jarred Vanderbilt, Jaxson Hayes and Maxi Kleber. That moment captured the unity Dončić has fostered among the Lakers' front office, coaching staff and players as he strives to deliver the franchise its 18th NBA championship — and perhaps more. It also captured James' conspicuous absence. ESPN reported that LeBron connected with Dončić via FaceTime to congratulate him on his extension.

LeBron's absence had nothing to do with Dončić personally. Even when considering James' busy offseason itinerary, however, his absence symbolized the current disconnect with the Lakers' front office.

After James exercised his \$52.6 million player option to stay with the Lakers, agent Rich Paul released a statement to ESPN and *The Athletic* that left the Lakers and other teams wondering about James' intentions.

"LeBron wants to compete for a championship," Paul said in the statement. "He knows the Lakers are building for the future. He understands that, but he values a realistic chance of winning it all. We are very appreciative of the partnership that we've had for eight years with Jeanie and Rob and consider the Lakers as a critical part of his career. We understand the difficulty in winning now while preparing for the future. We do want to evaluate what's best for LeBron at this stage in his life and career. He wants to make every season he has left count, and the Lakers understand that, are supportive and want what's best for him."

James faced league-wide skepticism that he would leave L.A. Only the Brooklyn Nets had cap space. Every team would listen to a James offer, but they wouldn't gut their roster to acquire him this late in his career. No way would James negotiate a buyout, accept a massive pay cut and leave his son Bronny. James never asked for a trade.

When James turned 40 on Dec. 30, 2024, he pondered what it would mean to him if he retired as a Laker. "I think that's the plan. I would love for it to end here," James said then. "That would be the plan. I came here to play the last stages of my career and to finish it off here. But I'm also not silly or too jaded to know the business of the game as well and know the business of basketball. But I think my relationship with this organization speaks for itself. Hopefully I don't have to go nowhere."

After all, James' partnership with the Lakers since 2018 has benefited both parties. He helped the Lakers win the 2020 NBA championship in the campus bubble during the pandemic, ending the organization's six-year playoff drought. He became the first father to play with his son in an NBA game while putting down roots in Los Angeles.

Still, the relationship between James and the Lakers has often felt transactional. Lakers fans never fully embraced him as they did their home-grown stars (Magic Johnson, Kobe Bryant). James spent most of his NBA career as a rival in Cleveland (2003-10, '14-18) and Miami (2010-14).

Though the Lakers have made the NBA playoffs in five of James' seven seasons there, he has played through four different head coaches, endured numerous injuries and faced criticism for exerting his influence with the front office. Those around James contend that he only encouraged the Lakers to maximize his championship window without dictating whom to sign.

Either way, Pelinka describes his offseason talks with James and Paul as "positive and supportive" as well as "very professional." Pelinka says that he has had "open and constant" dialogue with Paul. And Pelinka stresses that "we're in win-championship-now mode always" and will pursue big deals if they significantly enhance the Lakers' title chances.

Though the Lakers lost a valued veteran wing to the Houston Rockets (Dorian Finney-Smith), they mitigated his departure by signing another strong 3-and-D player (Jake LaRavia). Ayton and Smart say they joined the Lakers mostly because of their respect for both Dončić and James. Despite struggling in the Lakers' first-round playoff loss to the Minnesota Timberwolves, Hayes



WE BOTH MAKE OUR TEAMMATES BETTER. I THINK OUR IQ IS VERY HIGH. SO I THINK THAT'S GOING TO HELP EVERYBODY.

— LUKA DONČIĆ

returned on a one-year deal as Ayton's backup at center. Dončić played the recruiting role that James once relished, but he also wants to win an NBA title as soon as possible after guiding the Mavericks to the Finals only two years ago. The Lakers made these moves while staying under the second apron to avoid league-imposed restrictions on how to assemble their roster.

"LeBron's going to have high expectations for the roster, and we're going to do everything we can to meet those," Pelinka says. "But I also know that whatever it is, he's still going to give his 110% every night — whether that's scoring, assisting,

KEVIN JAJRAJ-IMAGN IMAGES



I CAME HERE TO PLAY THE
LAST STAGES OF MY CAREER.
... I THINK MY RELATIONSHIP
WITH THIS ORGANIZATION
SPEAKS FOR ITSELF.

— LEBRON JAMES

defending, rebounding, leading. We know that's always going to be 100%, and that never wavers."

Whatever James' misgivings about the front office, it hasn't negatively impacted his play. In his 22nd NBA season, James performed at an All-Star level while ranking 13th in points per game (24.4) and sixth in assists per game (8.2).

After the Lakers acquired Dončić, James willingly reduced his ball-handling responsibilities, moved off the ball and embraced a larger defensive-oriented role. He scoffed at questions about how he would mesh with Dončić and what they could accomplish together.

"Whatever we want it to be. It won't take long," James said after the trade. "I can play with anybody, and I think he can as well. So we'll work well together."

Dončić looked forlorn at his introductory press conference with the Lakers because he was still struggling to process the fact that the Mavericks had dealt him. Dončić had believed he would follow Dirk Nowitzki as Dallas' franchise cornerstone.

Nevertheless, Dončić sounded enthusiastic about playing for an iconic franchise with a generational talent. "We both make our teammates better," Dončić said of James. "I think our IQ is very high. So I think that's going to help everybody."

It sure did. While James thrived as an off-ball scorer, Dončić excelled as both a scorer and primary playmaker. The Lakers secured the No. 3 seed in the Western Conference partly because they succeeded with small-ball lineups and partly because James became a more willing and effective defender than in past seasons. It also helped that Dončić and James produced offensively.

All of those positive developments fizzled, though, during the Lakers' first-round series loss to the Timberwolves. The Wolves made Hayes a liability down low and exposed the Lakers' small-ball lineups.

Though Dončić averaged 30.2 points (on 45.2% shooting) along with 7.0 rebounds and 5.8 assists per game in the playoffs, he played too much isolation basketball and dealt with various injuries in Game 3 (stomach) and Game 5 (back). Despite averaging 25.4 points (on 48.9% shooting) along with 9.0 rebounds and 5.6 assists per game in the postseason, James appeared fatigued in crunch time. The Lakers' inconsistent ball movement also limited James' off-the-ball effectiveness.

"It's tough to get that chemistry on the court without any practices," Dončić said about his time with James. "So I'm really excited to have the preseason with [LeBron] so we can learn about each other on the court a lot."

Dončić said he took a month off to rest both his mind and body. He then devoted the rest of his offseason to weight training, conditioning drills and improved dieting. *Men's Health* profiled Dončić's efforts to add strength and reduce body fat.

"It was like a fresh start for me," Dončić said. "Obviously, I was on my way toward doing it. I had a fresh start and a little bit more time to get my mind off basketball and do other things."

Meanwhile, James vacationed in France and visited Las Vegas to see a portion of Bronny's Summer League games. LeBron has also trained extensively, but not without controversy. He posted photos of himself on his Instagram page of practicing both at the Cleveland Cavaliers' practice facility and the Los Angeles Clippers' old facility, which Klutch Sports owns and uses for its clients.

"In terms of LeBron's career, I think the No. 1 thing we have to do there is respect he and his family's decision on how long he's going to play," Pelinka says. "We want to respect his ability to come up with his timetable on that. That's really important. But if he had a chance to retire as a Laker, that would be great."

Predicting how that will play out seems as difficult as stopping James and Dončić together on the court. James has played at an All-Star-caliber level during every season with the Lakers (2018-25). But he has also missed at least 11 games each season because of various ailments. James will turn 41 on Dec. 30, which only heightens the possibility that he'll feel Father Time's unforgiving touch. Nonetheless, James has already defied the odds to this point in his career.

The Lakers appear convinced that James and Dončić can dominate enough as a duo to help the team win a title — at least for one season. Amid their dueling priorities, the Lakers, Dončić and James would certainly endorse that outcome.



KD'S HOUSTON PLANS

AFTER THE HISTORIC SEVEN-TEAM BLOCKBUSTER TRADE THAT BROUGHT HIM TO HOUSTON, KEVIN DURANT WANTS TO END HIS LEGENDARY CAREER ON HIS TERMS

BY MARC STEIN

The Houston Rockets have a new No. 7. He has scored more points than all but seven players in NBA history. And, poetically, it required a first-of-its-kind trade — involving a league-record seven teams — for the Rockets to get him.

If the reality of Kevin Durant's arrival in Houston lines up as neatly as the numerology, it could prove seriously problematic for the rest of the Western Conference.

Maybe even for the team that drafted the highly efficient scoring machine all those years ago.

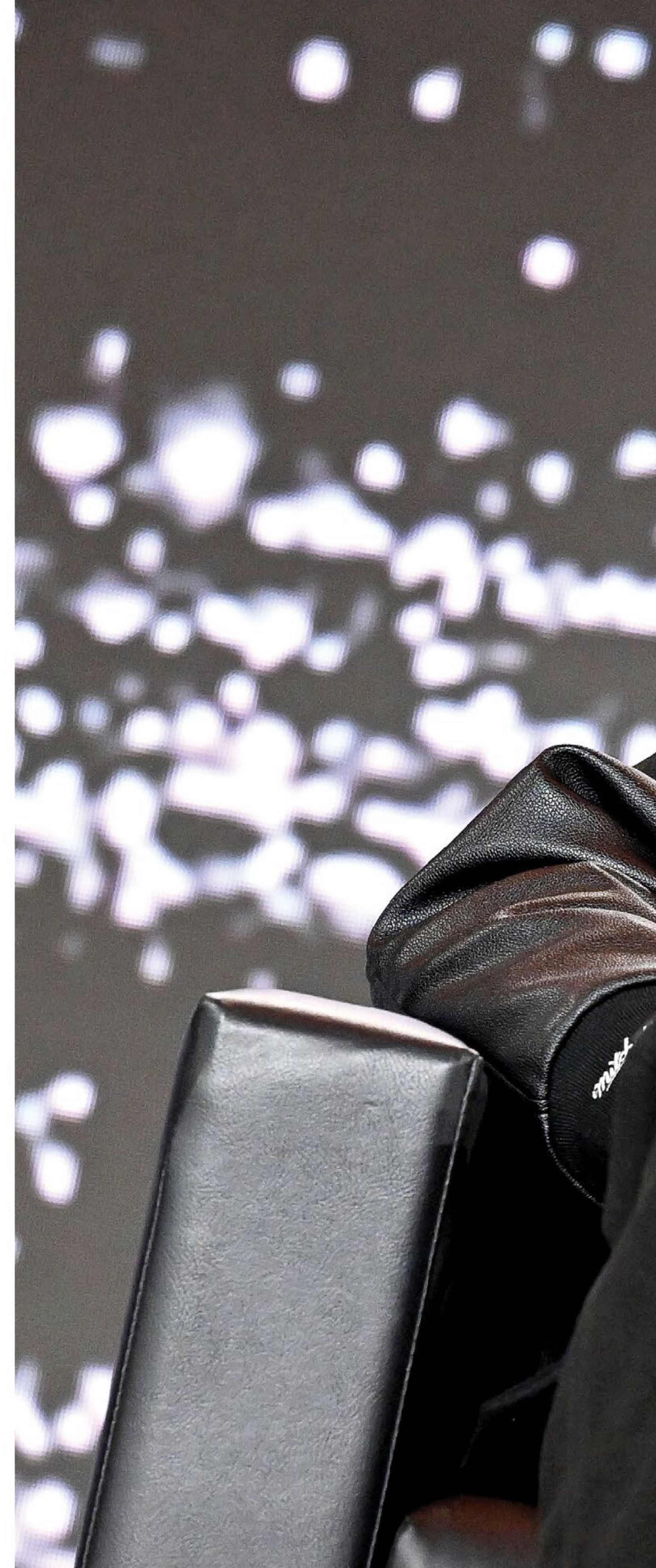
The Western Conference's foremost threat to the newly crowned champions from Oklaho-

ma City would indeed appear to be the Rockets, who responded to a humbling first-round exit to the lower-seeded Golden State Warriors by trading for Durant to be the bucket-getter at the end of games that 52-win Houston — for all of its plucky youth and athleticism and defensive snarl — clearly lacked.

To heap even more symbolism into the story arc, Houston sealed its deal with Phoenix to acquire the future Hall of Famer on the exact same day that the Thunder — very much Shai Gilgeous-Alexander's team now that they're a full decade removed from the Durant era — became the NBA's seventh new champion in a span of seven seasons.

On the morning of June 22, 2025, news broke that the Rockets and Suns had agreed to the initial framework of a Durant blockbuster that would eventually expand to a seven-team bonanza when the trade was officially consummated in July. That evening, Oklahoma City capitalized on Tyrese Haliburton's devastating Achilles tear to defeat the visiting Indiana Pacers in Game 7 of a stirring NBA Finals and win the club's first championship since leaving Seattle after Durant's rookie season in 2007-08.

Next up? On Oct. 21 — Ring Night for the Thunder — Durant will make his official Rockets debut ... with NBC providing the coverage



SLAVEN VLASIC/GETTY IMAGES



“
IT DOESN'T
MATTER HIS AGE.
ULTIMATELY, HE'S
**KEVIN
DURANT.**
— ALPEREN ŞENGÜN

in the venerable network's return to NBA broadcasting for the first time since the 2002 NBA Finals.

No script writer would have dared to propose all these twists and turns.

"Everyone is excited to play with him," Rockets big man Alperen Şengün, Houston's only All-Star last season, said in an interview in his native Türkiye in July after joining up with his national team in advance of the EuroBasket tournament.

"It doesn't matter his age," Şengün added. "Ultimately, he's Kevin Durant."

Even at 37? Even entering his 18th NBA season?

Consider the reaction to the trade

from former Rockets guard Jalen Green, who was the centerpiece of the return package Phoenix ultimately accepted for the two-time NBA Finals MVP.

"Listen," Green wrote in a first-person piece for *The Players Tribune*, "nobody likes to get traded. But I can honestly say that I get it, bro."

"This is a business," Green continued. "And if I was up there in the executive chair, I probably would've made the deal, too."

As unexpectedly glowing as Green's endorsement was of the trade that made him an ex-Rocket, it wasn't always a slam dunk for

the executive who actually did the deal. For months behind the scenes, Rockets general manager Rafael Stone repeatedly downplayed the idea of pursuing Durant. Almost from the moment that Houston acquired control of multiple future first-round picks belonging to Phoenix via a June 2024 trade with the Brooklyn Nets, Stone and other Rockets officials attempted to convince the outside world that Houston did not specifically target all those Suns first-rounders to coerce Phoenix into shipping Durant to the land of NASA to try to get some of that draft capital back.

The Rockets firmly pledged early last season — and again at the

February trade deadline — that they would not make a major in-season deal. The frequently whispered justification for that stance: Houston had timeline concerns about neatly slotting Durant into the core of its franchise with so many prospects on the roster who are 25 or younger. Even going into the playoffs, with the Rockets holding the West's No. 2 seed but widely expected to struggle against the more seasoned No. 7 Warriors, team officials were adamant that they wanted to let the twosome of Şengün and Green — flanked by the likes of Jabari Smith Jr., Tari Eason and the rising defensive menace Amen Thompson — continue to blossom.

Then the series played out in myriad painful ways. The Rockets lost Game 7 at home. Green struggled mightily, apart from a 38-point eruption in Game 2. The Rockets seemed to be crying out for a proven scorer like Durant.

What also changed: After initially exploring the Durant trade landscape in February before Durant himself urged team officials to let him finish out the season in the desert, Phoenix made the decision in June that it was time to cut ties — even as the Suns knew they would not be able to bring back anywhere near as much in terms of trade assets as they had surrendered to the Nets to acquire Durant in February 2023.

The Suns' determination to move Durant, buy out Bradley Beal and essentially start over by building a new team around Phoenix lifer Devin Booker brought the Durant trade price point to a level that Houston couldn't resist. The Rockets were comfortable surrendering Green and veteran swingman Dillon Brooks, with players like Thompson and Eason poised to seize the minutes Brooks left behind. Houston was also able to get Durant without allowing Phoenix to reclaim its unprotected first-round picks in 2027 and '29. All the Rockets had to relinquish in addition to Green and Brooks was the Suns' first-round pick in June, which landed at No.



10 overall; they also sent Phoenix a 2026 second-round draft pick and a 2032 second-round pick. For a team in win-now mode, Houston can credibly claim that it pilfered one of the sport's all-time greats from Phoenix at a very reasonable cost.

"He's Kevin Durant," Stone said in early July after the trade was

formally consummated. "He's just ... he's really good. He's super efficient. He had a great year last year. He's obviously not 30 anymore, but he hasn't really fallen off, and we just think he has a chance to really be impactful for us."

It certainly didn't hurt the deal's chances that two key figures in the Rockets' organization — head coach Ime Udoka and assistant coach Royal Ivey — are two of the foremost Durant fans on Earth.

Udoka has been said to be eager to coach Durant since he was in Boston — back when there were rumblings that the Celtics might even be willing to part with future NBA Finals MVP Jaylen Brown to acquire the future Hall of Famer. Then Ivey, also in June, committed to staying with the Rockets even though the San Antonio Spurs made a determined push to hire him away from Houston to serve as an assistant on Mitch Johnson's first coaching staff. Ivey also interviewed for the Suns' head coaching vacancy that ultimately went to Jordan Ott, but when he remained in Houston, it was interpreted by some in league circles that Durant was indeed on his way.

The question now, of course, is what sort of player the Rockets are getting. Durant has won four scoring titles and two championship rings. He is also a medical marvel: Since sustaining a torn Achilles in the 2019 NBA Finals and missing the entire 2019-20 season, Durant has averaged nearly 28 points and seven rebounds per game. He has also averaged better than five assists per game in that span while flirting with 50/40/90 shooting throughout his past five seasons post-Achilles tear.

The NBA has never seen another Achilles patient like him.

Yet it's also true that Durant hasn't enjoyed a single playoff victory over the past two seasons. It would be wholly unfair to foist all the blame for the Suns' many disappointments on him, but the two-season experiment that brought

Beal in as the third wheel to Durant and Booker will unavoidably be recorded as an utter failure.

And that led one season rival executive to tell *Athlon Sports*: “He’s one of the greatest players we’ve ever seen, but I’m just not sure he can drive winning like he used to.”

“

I WANT MY CAREER TO END ON MY TERMS. THAT’S THE ONLY THING.

— KEVIN DURANT

In late February, after he successfully convinced the Suns not to trade him, Durant made a surprise appearance on the podcast that his former Warriors teammate Draymond Green co-hosts with Baron Davis. Durant was asked if he was hoping to play out his career as a Sun.

“I want my career to end on my terms,” Durant countered. “That’s the only thing.”

If you spend any time following Durant on social media, you understand just how serious he is about that aim. Six weeks into his Rockets career, Durant had not yet been made available to the Houston media, but he could be seen and heard frequently throughout the summer, jousting with fans on X unlike any NBA superstar that #thisleague has ever known.

During a days-long stretch in August, Durant was particularly outspoken in engaging critical fans on X. The back-and-forth started when a Los Angeles-based podcaster (@DimeDropperPod) asserted that Durant was not the scoring savant that he is reputed to be.

“30K points on low fga,” Durant wrote. “Ima coaches dream. Dime dropper, I mastered scoring at 24 years old. Give it a rest. I don’t care about being the best scorer ever. You are diminishing my all time greatness calling me that.”



For the next few days, Durant continued to go back and forth with various readers and dissenters, many of them openly in disbelief that Durant was so willing to participate in such extended dialogue.

In response to suggestions that he is so active on X because he’s insecure, Durant wrote: “Because I

do my own PR? Don’t you present your résumé to people when they question your work?”

In response to the notion that he betrayed the Thunder by leaving them in the summer of 2016 to join the Golden State team that had just beaten Oklahoma City in the Western Conference finals: “OK cool. You feel how u feel and ill feel how I feel. theres no harm in that.”

In response to suggestions that the NBA scheduled Houston as Oklahoma City’s Ring Night opponent to satiate the media’s desire for drama: “No, they know FANS will eat this up.”

Yup. His terms, indeed.

Most crucially, Durant got the destination he wanted in the end for what is widely presumed to be his final stop. The Rockets will be his fifth NBA team rather than, say, Minnesota. The Timberwolves indeed explored the feasibility of trading for him themselves to team Durant with his former Olympic teammate and longtime KD fan Anthony Edwards, but they backed off in large part because they knew Durant didn’t want to be there. They knew he wanted to be a Rocket.

And he certainly seems intent on going out on his own terms. Which in the offseason translates to unapologetically sharing whatever is on his mind. No one will ever be able to assert that we didn’t know what Durant was thinking.

Explaining why he chooses to be so present online, Durant wrote: “I get nothing but lashes for this but it’s entertainment for some people so I provide that service for them. Think of it like Dave Chapelle or any comedian you like [who] just goes to a comedy club and test[s] out his jokes unexpectedly. Some people feel offended by the jokes, but some understand the setting.”

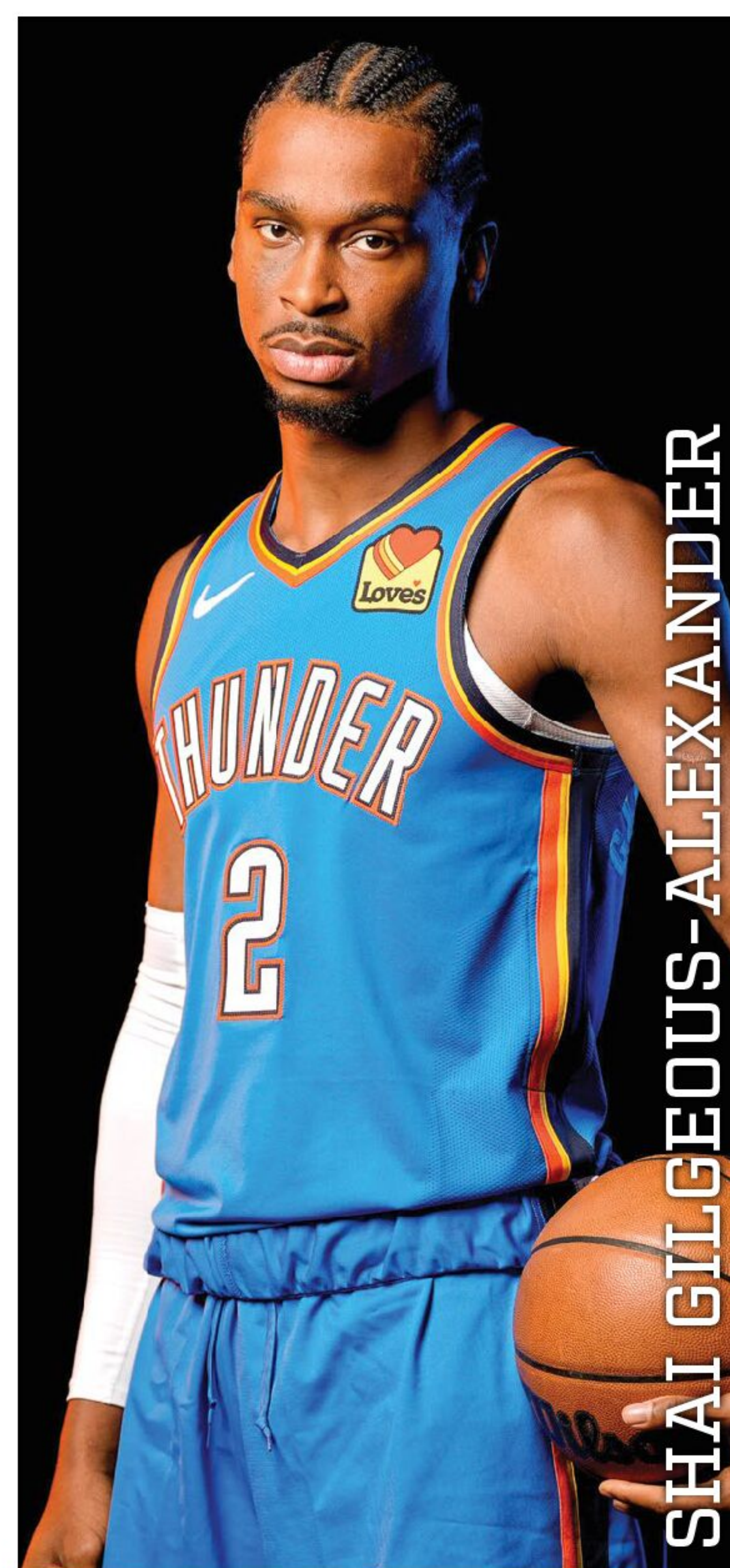
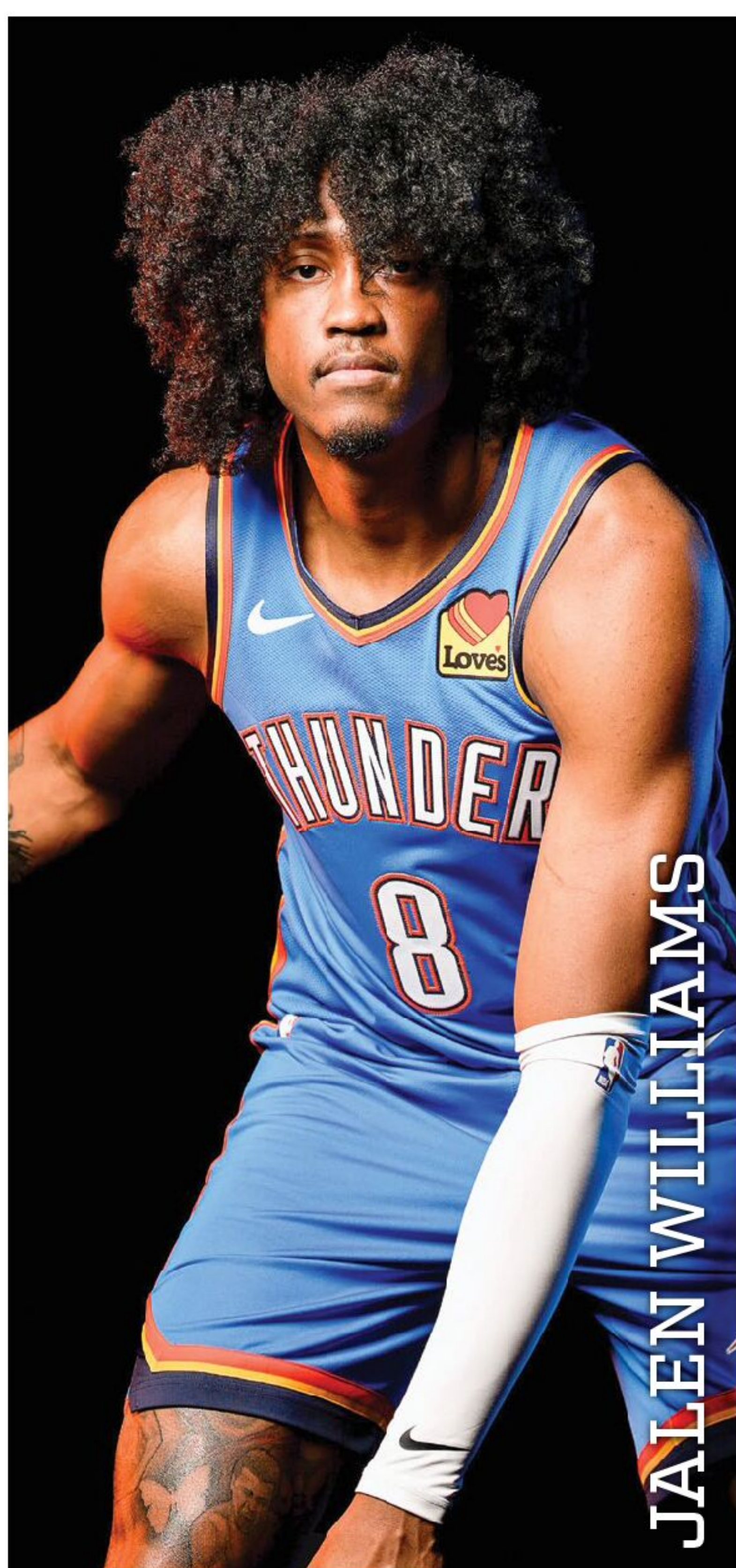
When a few fans predictably pushed back on Durant’s perceived temerity to put his social media musings in the same sentence as a comedian as accomplished as Chapelle, he doubled down.

“I truly believe if I locked in,” he wrote, “I could do anything.”

15

KEY STORYLINES FOR THE UPCOMING SEASON

BY SAM AMICO



1 THUNDER STRIKE
The Oklahoma City Thunder followed up their 2023-24 breakout with an even stronger encore, claiming the No. 1 seed in the Western Conference for the second straight year. This time, they finished the job. NBA MVP Shai Gilgeous-Alexander led the way, torching defenses with a lethal mid-range game and an uncanny ability to get to his spots. He scored efficiently and consistently, but

Oklahoma City's true calling card was its defense. The Thunder were physical, relentless and unyielding in big moments.

Their postseason run culminated in a championship, giving the franchise its first title since the Seattle days. Now comes the next challenge: defending it. The front office wasted no time locking up the core of Gilgeous-Alexander, Jalen Williams and Chet Holmgren, ensuring that the

foundation will remain intact for years to come. That move sent a clear message — they intend to keep this group together and make another run.

The West is loaded with contenders, but the Thunder's youth, depth and defensive identity give them a chance to build something bigger. Whether their title was the start of a dynasty or a single shining season will be one of the league's most compelling storylines.

NATHAN J. FISH/THE OKLAHOMAN (3)



LEBRON JAMES
LUKA DONČIĆ

3 HOPE RETURNS TO DALLAS

The Dallas Mavericks stunned the NBA last February by trading Luka Dončić to the Lakers and getting Anthony Davis in return. It was one of the most shocking moves in league history, and Dallas fans made their displeasure clear. The gamble carried obvious risks, and the first one hit quickly when Davis was sidelined almost immediately with another injury.

The bad luck didn't stop there. Kyrie Irving, the team's other star, tore his ACL later in the season and is expected to miss a significant portion, if not all, of 2025-26. Just like that, the team that reached the 2024 NBA Finals was unrecognizable.

Then the lottery happened. Against all odds, Dallas landed the No. 1 overall pick and used it to select Cooper Flagg, the versatile forward out of Duke. His arrival has injected new life into the franchise, giving fans and front office alike a reason to believe that the climb back to contention might be shorter than expected.

Flagg's development will be closely monitored, but the Mavericks' fortunes may still hinge on Davis staying healthy and Irving eventually returning. Until then, Dallas rides the wave of hope sparked by their new franchise cornerstone.



COOPER FLAGG

2 NEW ALPHA IN LA

For the first time in his career, LeBron James enters a season as the clear No. 2 option. The Los Angeles Lakers are now Luka Dončić's team, and everyone knows it — including James. That dynamic shift is something no other franchise has experienced with LeBron, who has always been the centerpiece wherever he's played.

The transition was not exactly smooth. Early in the offseason, both sides engaged in subtle jabs and cryptic messaging. By late summer, the tension seemed to cool, and the focus shifted toward building a roster capable of competing in a loaded Western Conference.

Former No. 1 overall pick Deandre Ayton arrived after a buyout with the Portland Trail Blazers. His skill set fills a glaring need for interior scoring and rebounding, though his commitment to consistent effort will be closely watched. Veteran guard Marcus Smart also signed on, bringing defensive intensity and playoff experience to the backcourt.

The real story, however, is how James — who turns 41 in December — adapts to a supporting role. If he embraces it fully and remains healthy, the Lakers could have the rare luxury of a superstar willing to play second fiddle for the greater good.

FROM LEFT: JASON PARKHURST-IMAGN IMAGES; CANDICE WARD-IMAGN IMAGES

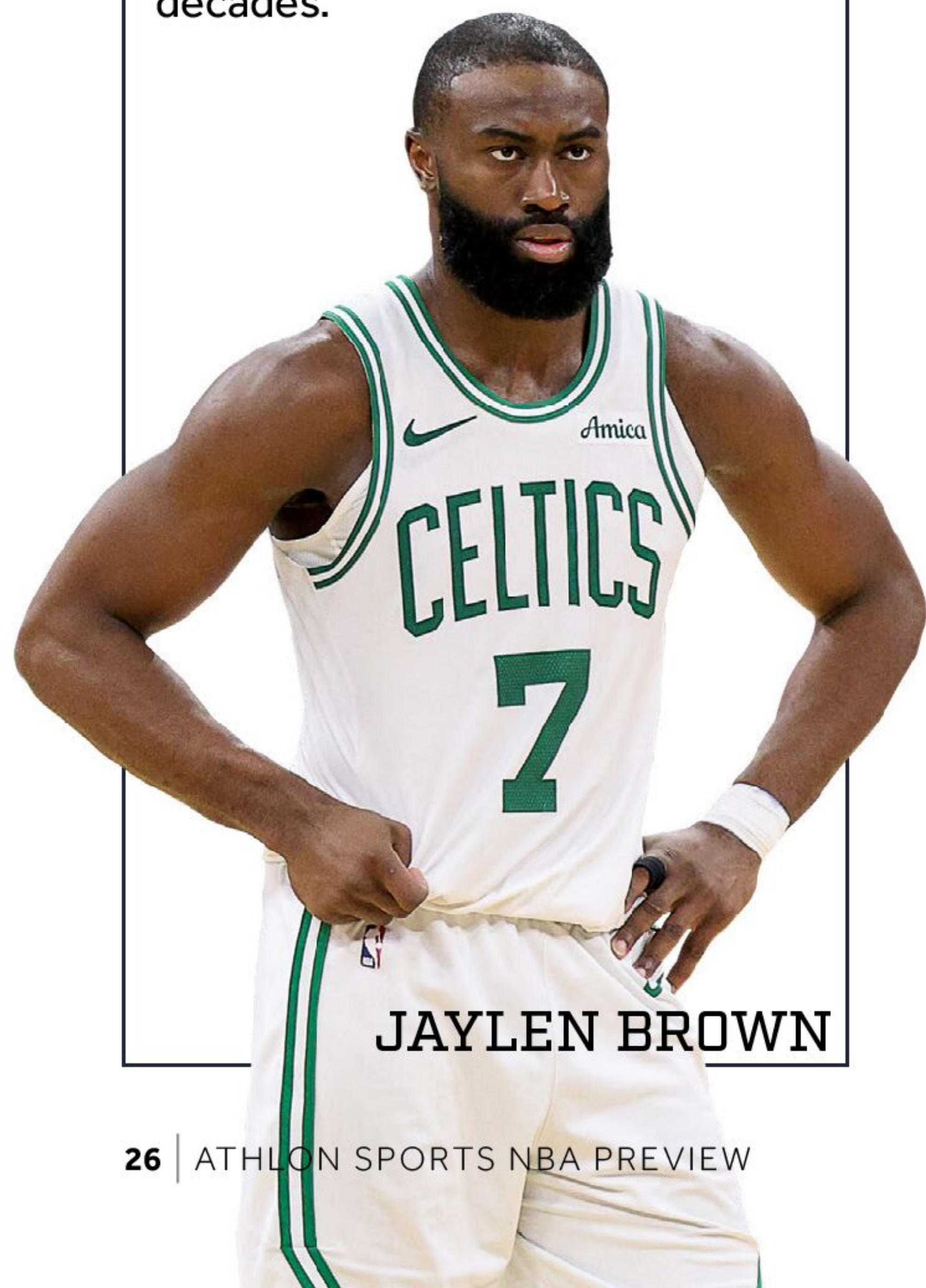
4 CELTICS HIT THE RESET BUTTON

Just over a year removed from hoisting the Larry O'Brien Trophy, the Boston Celtics have entered a full-scale reset. An ownership change set the tone, and a desire to trim salary accelerated the process. Jayson Tatum's torn Achilles in the Eastern Conference semifinals — an injury expected to keep him out for most, if not all, of the 2025-26 season — only sped things along.

Two more core pieces are gone. Boston dealt Kristaps Porzingis to the Atlanta Hawks and Jrue Holiday to the Portland Trail Blazers, with both moves aimed at shedding big contracts. The return was minimal in terms of immediate impact. The contender label, at least for now, has been stripped away.

That leaves Jaylen Brown as the face of the franchise. He will have to shoulder the offensive load while serving as the primary leader in a locker room that has undergone significant turnover. For head coach Joe Mazzulla, this will be his most demanding year yet. Guiding a younger transitional roster through the grind of an 82-game season is a different challenge than steering a contender.

For one of the league's proudest franchises, this could be the most sobering season Boston fans have experienced in decades.



JAYLEN BROWN



TYRESE HALIBURTON

5 PACERS' FAIRY TALE TAKES A TURN

Indiana's 2024-25 campaign felt like a basketball movie come to life. The Pacers caught fire in the second half, stormed through the playoffs and made an improbable run to the NBA Finals. Their mix of grit, defensive intensity and unselfish play gave them the feel of a team of destiny — until everything changed in Game 7.

Tyrese Haliburton, the Pacers' offensive engine and emotional leader, tore his Achilles early in the deciding game against Oklahoma City. The injury will sideline him for the entire 2025-26 season. Any hopes of running it back took another hit when starting center Myles Turner stunned the fan base by signing with the Milwaukee Bucks in free agency.

The Pacers still have a defensive identity built on physical play, sharp rotations and relentless energy. That approach will keep them competitive and give them a chance to hang around the Eastern Conference playoff picture. But without Haliburton's playmaking and Turner's interior presence, it is hard to imagine Indiana reaching the heights of last spring. From NBA Finals contender to fighting for a spot in the Play-In Tournament, the Pacers' next chapter will be all about survival.

6 KNICKS CHANGE COURSE

The New York Knicks finally broke through last season, reaching the Eastern Conference finals for the first time in 25 years. It was a milestone moment for the franchise and a validation of the talent they had assembled. The reward for head coach Tom Thibodeau? A pink slip.

New York turned to Mike Brown, who brings his own unique perspective on job security after being fired by the Sacramento Kings at the start of last season. Brown has plenty of experience managing stars and high expectations, and the Knicks will count on that as they aim to take the next step.

The roster is built to contend. Jalen Brunson remains one of the league's most efficient and relentless scoring guards. Karl-Anthony Towns provides inside-out offense, while Mikal Bridges and OG Anunoby give the Knicks a pair of elite perimeter defenders who can also hit 3-pointers. Depth is solid, and the blend of shooting, defense and shot creation is enough to match up with any team in the Eastern Conference.

New York has entered seasons with NBA Finals buzz before, but delivering on it has always been the problem. If this is the group that finally breaks through, it would alleviate decades of frustration.



MIKE BROWN

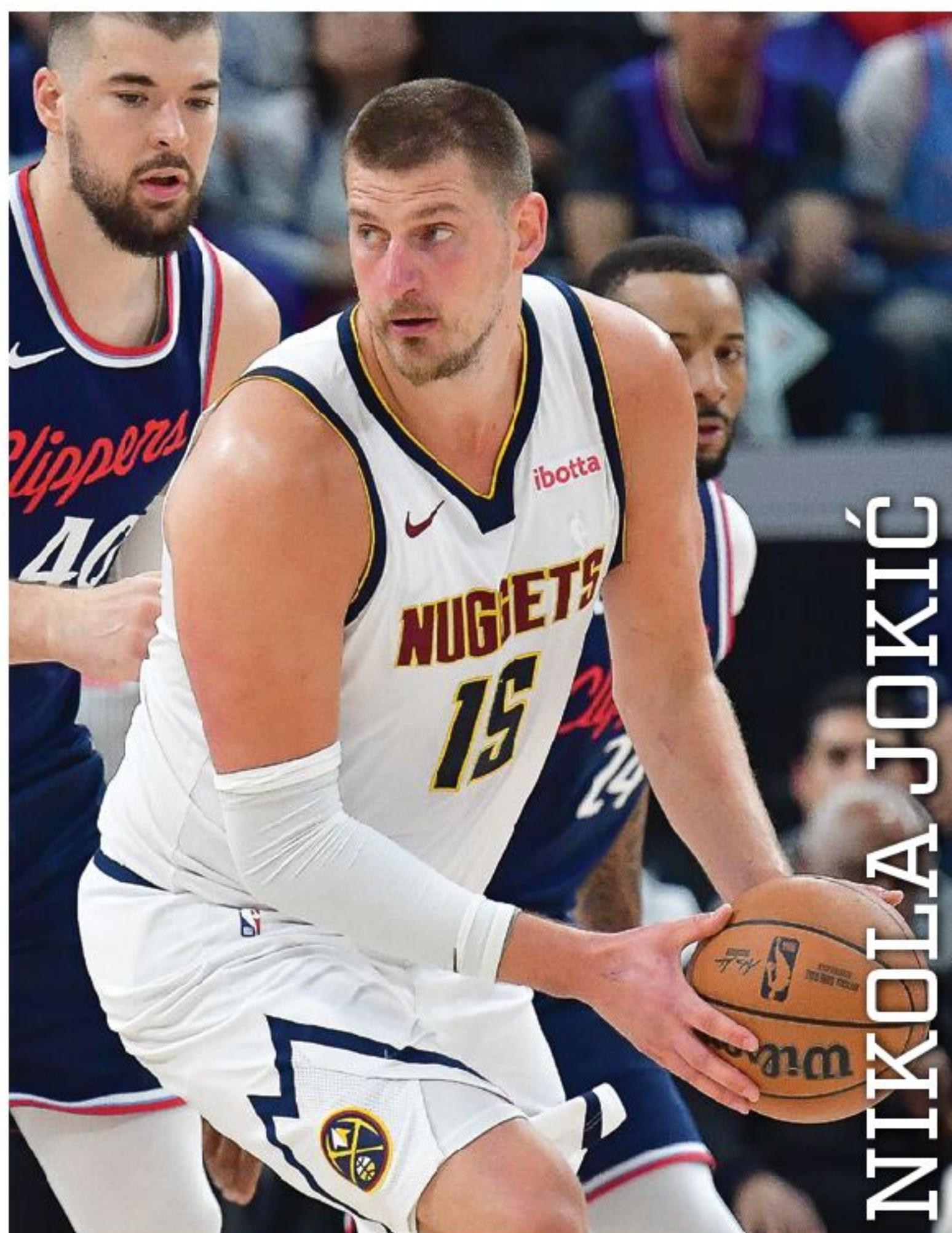
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: KYLE TERADA-IMAGN IMAGES; BRAD PENNER-USA TODAY SPORTS; NATHAN RAY SEEBECK-IMAGN IMAGES

7 NUGGETS RELOAD AROUND JOKIĆ

The Denver Nuggets hit the 50-win mark for the third straight season in 2024-25, establishing themselves as one of the league's most consistent winners. They are favored to make it four in a row this year — and for once, they might have a bench to help Nikola Jokić carry the load.

Last season's depth was almost nonexistent, with Russell Westbrook's brief stint providing little impact. This summer, Denver reshaped the roster. The Nuggets traded Michael Porter Jr. to the Brooklyn Nets for sharpshooter Cameron Johnson, whose quick release and ability to play off the ball make him an ideal fit next to Jokić. Jonas Valančiūnas arrived from Sacramento in a steal of a deal, giving the Nuggets a capable backup center for the first time in years. Bruce Brown returns to reprise his key role from the 2023 title run, and Tim Hardaway Jr. adds another perimeter scoring threat.

Head coach David Adelman, who replaced the fired Michael Malone just before last year's playoffs, now has the job full-time, and with Jokić's public backing. The Nuggets may be stronger than their 2023 title team, but so is the Western Conference. Even so, they remain firmly in the contender conversation.



NIKOLA JOKIĆ

8 ROCKETS GO ALL-IN WITH DURANT

The Houston Rockets' rise last season was one of the league's biggest surprises. They finished 52-30, claimed the No. 2 seed in the West and looked ready to take the next step. Instead, their postseason ended abruptly with a first-round loss to the battle-tested Golden State Warriors. The message was clear — talent was there, but experience and elite firepower were still missing.

Enter Kevin Durant. In a blockbuster seven-team deal, Houston sent starters Jalen Green and Dillon Brooks and a bundle of draft picks to the Phoenix Suns to land the 16-time All-Star. Durant is no longer in his prime, but his scoring touch and length remain elite. His ability to play alongside Alperen Şengün in the frontcourt and work off Fred VanVleet in the backcourt gives the Rockets one of the league's most intriguing offensive trios.

Head coach Ime Udoka, still one of the NBA's most underrated tacticians, will now have the challenge (and the luxury) of molding a roster that blends veteran star power with a young, hungry supporting cast. If Durant stays healthy, Houston could be far more dangerous than last season's promising group and a legitimate threat to win the Western Conference title.



KEVIN DURANT

9 CAN THE CAVS FINALLY CAPITALIZE?

Head coach Kenny Atkinson's first season in Cleveland could not have started better. The Cavaliers won their first 15 games and finished 64-18, setting a franchise record for wins in a season without LeBron James. Donovan Mitchell earned first-team All-NBA honors, Evan Mobley was named Defensive Player of the Year and was second-team All-NBA, and the Cavs rolled into the playoffs looking like true contenders.

They opened with a sweep of the Miami Heat, but the momentum came to a halt in the second round. Darius Garland missed the first two games against Indiana with a toe injury, then tried to gut it out in the final three. He was clearly limited, and Cleveland fell in five games. Garland underwent offseason surgery and is expected to miss the start of the season.

To fortify the backcourt, the Cavs traded Isaac Okoro to the Chicago Bulls for Lonzo Ball. The move comes with risk — Ball has played only 35 total games over the past three years due to knee and wrist issues. Still, the core returns intact, and Cleveland enters the season as one of the East's favorites. Whether the Cavs can finally match regular-season dominance with postseason success remains a pressing question.



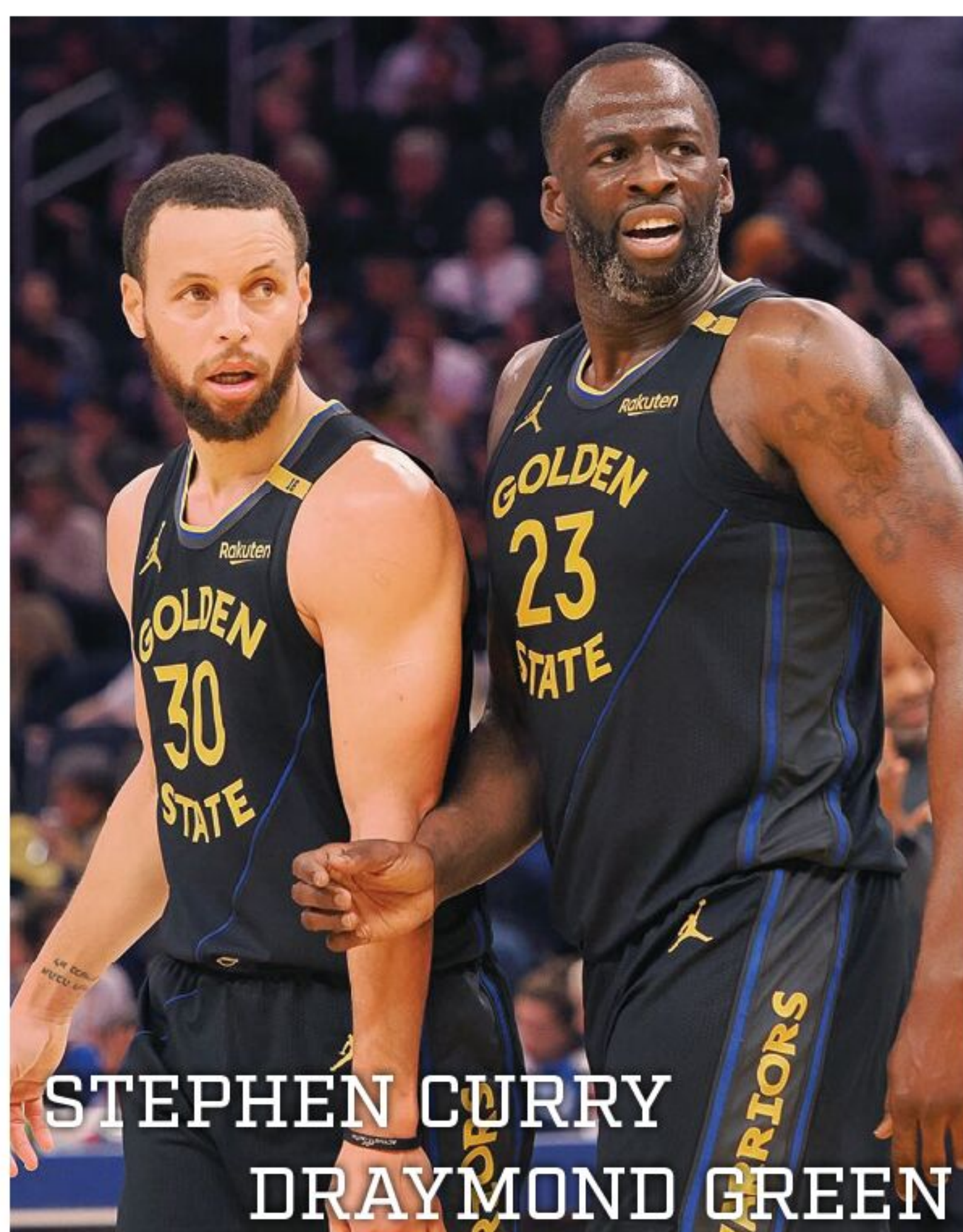
DONOVAN MITCHELL

10 ONE LAST RIDE FOR THE WARRIORS?

The Golden State Warriors' dynasty years are in the rearview mirror, but the core of Stephen Curry and Draymond Green remains intact and is still impactful. Curry, now 37, continues to look like the league's premier perimeter shotmaker, his quick release and deep range unchanged from a decade ago. Green is still the defensive heartbeat, orchestrating rotations and setting a tone that has defined Golden State's style for years.

At last season's trade deadline, the Warriors added Jimmy Butler. At 35, Butler may have lost a half-step, but he still brings toughness, playoff experience and a knack for raising his level of play when the stakes are highest. Together, the trio gives Golden State veteran leadership and a championship pedigree.

The question is how much longer this group can contend. Age, depth and the physical toll of years of deep playoff runs are hard to ignore. If the Warriors fail to make a serious push this season, the calls to break up the core will only grow louder. This could be their final legitimate chance to contend, and the outcome may dictate just how soon a full rebuild in the Bay begins.



STEPHEN CURRY
DRAYMOND GREEN

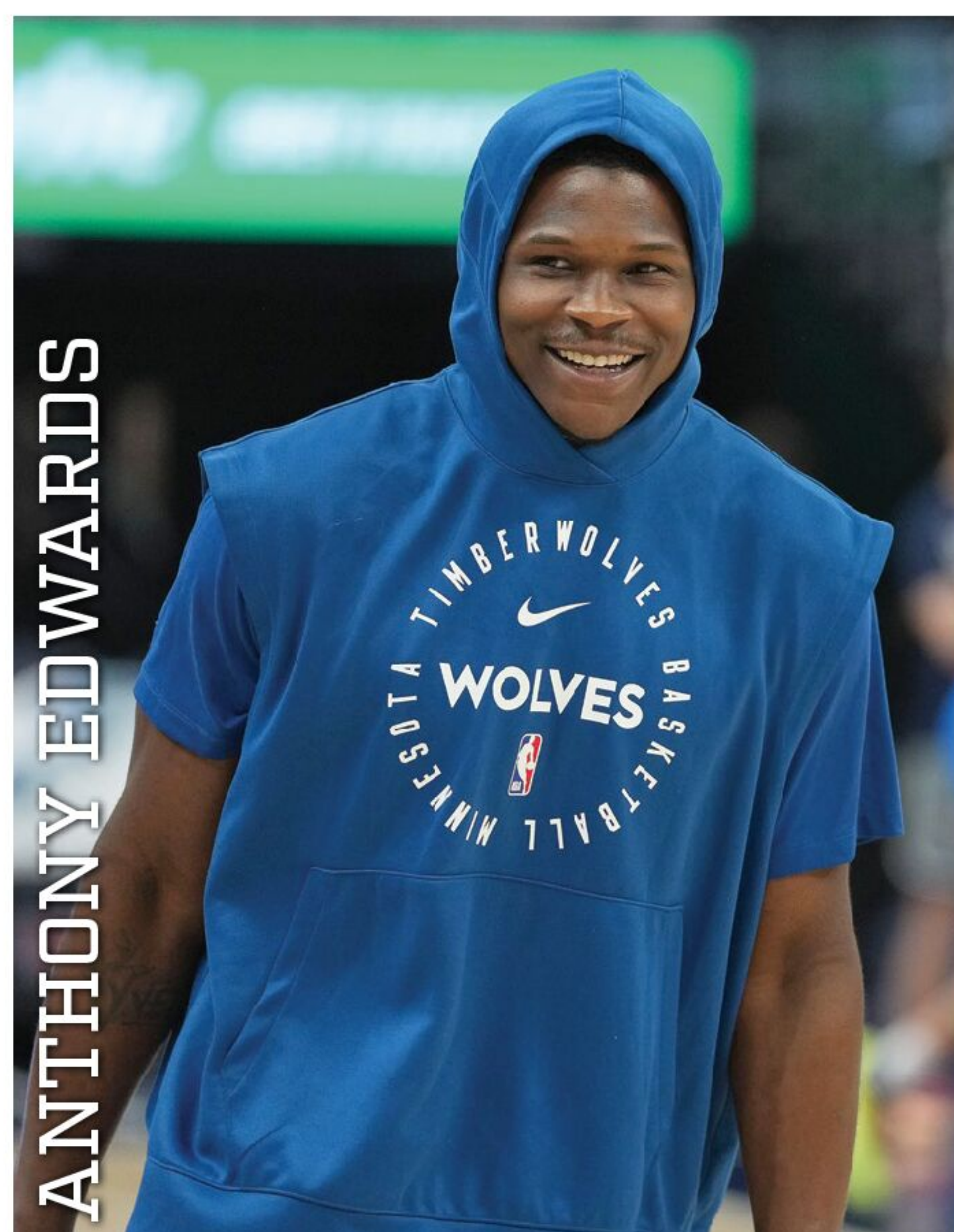
11 TIMBERWOLVES KEEP KNOCKING ON THE DOOR

The Minnesota Timberwolves have quietly become the Western Conference's model of consistency in the postseason. They are the only team to reach the past two Western Conference finals, a run fueled by the emergence of Anthony Edwards as one of the league's brightest stars.

Last summer's blockbuster trade sent Karl-Anthony Towns to the New York Knicks and brought Julius Randle and Donte DiVincenzo to Minnesota. The new-look Wolves kept their edge, defending at a high level and grinding out wins when it mattered most. Their playoff run ended in the West finals, where like so many others, they struggled to solve the Oklahoma City Thunder's relentless pressure.

Even so, Edwards gives Minnesota a foundation that keeps them in the contender conversation. His combination of scoring, athleticism and swagger makes him a threat in any series. Under head coach Chris Finch, the Wolves rarely draw heavy regular-season hype, but the past two years have shown that they peak when the stakes are highest.

The question now is whether they can finally take the next step. With a proven playoff core and Edwards still ascending, this might be their best chance yet to break through.



ANTHONY EDWARDS

12

BUCKS AIM TO REBOUND AND KEEP GIANNIS

Another early playoff exit has put the Milwaukee Bucks squarely in the rumor mill regarding Giannis Antetokounmpo's future. The two-time MVP spent much of the offseason surrounded by speculation that he might be ready to move on if Milwaukee's contention window closes. The Damian Lillard experiment didn't help matters. What began with title hopes ended in disappointment, capped by Lillard's torn Achilles in the playoffs. The Bucks waived and stretched his contract shortly after.

With that freed-up salary slot, Milwaukee made its biggest move of the summer, signing former Indiana Pacers center Myles Turner. Long a rival in the Central Division, Turner gives the Bucks an elite rim protector and floor spacer to pair with Antetokounmpo. They also still have Kyle Kuzma, an under-the-radar addition late last season, giving the frontcourt more scoring options.

The backcourt, however, remains unsettled. Consistent production when it matters most is far from guaranteed, and depth could be a concern against top Eastern Conference teams. Head coach Doc Rivers still insists Milwaukee will contend, but the margin for error feels thin. The results could determine not only their season but also whether Giannis commits to Milwaukee's long-term future.



GIANNIS
ANTETOKOUNMPO

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: KELLEY L COX-IMAGN IMAGES; TREVOR RUSZKOWSKI-IMAGN IMAGES; JESSE JOHNSON-IMAGN IMAGES



KAWHI LEONARD

13

CLIPPERS RELOAD, BUT THE CLOCK IS TICKING

When the conversation turns to Western Conference contenders, the Los Angeles Clippers rarely lead the discussion. That's despite having Kawhi Leonard, an NBA Finals MVP with two different teams, and Ty Lue, a championship-winning head coach. Add in James Harden, one of the league's most prolific offensive guards, and the core certainly has the résumé. The problem is, none of those titles came with the Clippers. This group can't seem to get out of the first round.

The offseason brought moves designed to alter that narrative. Bradley Beal joined after a buyout in Phoenix, where injuries and inconsistency defined his stint. Former Bucks center Brook Lopez signed on, likely shifting to a back-up role behind Ivica Zubac while still offering rim protection. In a trade with the Utah Jazz, the Clippers acquired forward John Collins, a versatile scorer and rebounder who could fit seamlessly alongside Leonard and Harden.

They will miss Norman Powell, who left for Miami after a career year, but on paper, this roster looks deeper and more balanced. Whether that translates to postseason success remains the question. Once again, it feels like Finals or bust — a familiar refrain in L.A.'s other locker room.

FROM LEFT: GARY A. VASQUEZ-IMAGN IMAGES; REGGIE HILDRED-IMAGN IMAGES

14 SPURS SEEK FIRST PLAYOFF STEP WITH WEMBANYAMA

The San Antonio Spurs' long-term vision centers on Victor Wembanyama leading them back to prominence. That ultimate goal might still be a few years away, but this season could mark an important step. Wembanyama missed the end of last season with a blood clot issue that caused understandable concern, but he has since been cleared and is expected again to be the focal point on both ends of the floor.

San Antonio made notable additions to support him. No. 2 overall pick Dylan Harper brings scoring and playmaking upside to a backcourt that already features midseason acquisition De'Aaron Fox and reigning Rookie of the Year Stephon Castle. That combination gives the Spurs a mix of speed, defense and offensive creation they lacked in previous seasons.

This will also be the first full year with Mitch Johnson as head coach, after franchise legend Gregg Popovich moved into a front office role following an early-season stroke. Johnson inherits a roster with young talent and room to grow.

The Spurs are not yet ready to contend for a title, but making the playoffs would be a meaningful milestone. And a sign that Wembanyama's rise is right on schedule.



VICTOR WEMBANYAMA

DE'AARON FOX

15 WHO RISES AS EAST CONTENDER?

While the Cleveland Cavaliers, New York Knicks and possibly the Milwaukee Bucks enter 2025-26 as the Eastern Conference's top tier, the next wave of challengers is forming. And the Orlando Magic may be leading it. Orlando already owned one of the league's best defenses under head coach Jamahl Mosley, but the Magic were missing consistent outside shooting. That's why they swung a trade with the Memphis Grizzlies for Desmond Bane, one of the NBA's most reliable perimeter scorers. Bane joins Paolo Banchero, Franz Wagner and Jalen Suggs — the latter hoping to stay healthy — in a starting group that now has the balance to match its defensive bite.

The Atlanta Hawks could also join that conversation. Trae Young looked like a pass-first savant last season, drawing comparisons to Steve Nash in his ability to create for teammates. Atlanta was gifted Kristaps Porziņģis from Boston, giving Young a pick-and-pop partner who can stretch defenses to the arc.

And then there are the Detroit Pistons, who followed up a season that featured a 28-game losing streak with a 44-38 record and a competitive first-round showing against the Knicks. Cade Cunningham's continued growth could push Detroit into the mix.

For now, though, Orlando's combination of defense and upgraded shooting may make the Magic the Eastern Conference's most intriguing dark horse.

EASTERN CONFERENCE

Atlantic Division

1. New York*
2. Boston
3. Philadelphia
4. Toronto
5. Brooklyn

Central Division

1. Cleveland*
2. Detroit*
3. Milwaukee*
4. Indiana*
5. Chicago

Southeast Division

1. Orlando*
2. Atlanta*
3. Miami*
4. Charlotte
5. Washington

EASTERN CONFERENCE FINALS
CLEVELAND OVER ORLANDO

* playoff teams

WESTERN CONFERENCE

Southwest Division

1. Houston*
2. San Antonio*
3. Dallas
4. Memphis
5. New Orleans

Northwest Division

1. Oklahoma City*
2. Denver*
3. Minnesota*
4. Portland
5. Utah

Pacific Division

1. L.A. Lakers*
2. L.A. Clippers*
3. Golden State*
4. Sacramento
5. Phoenix

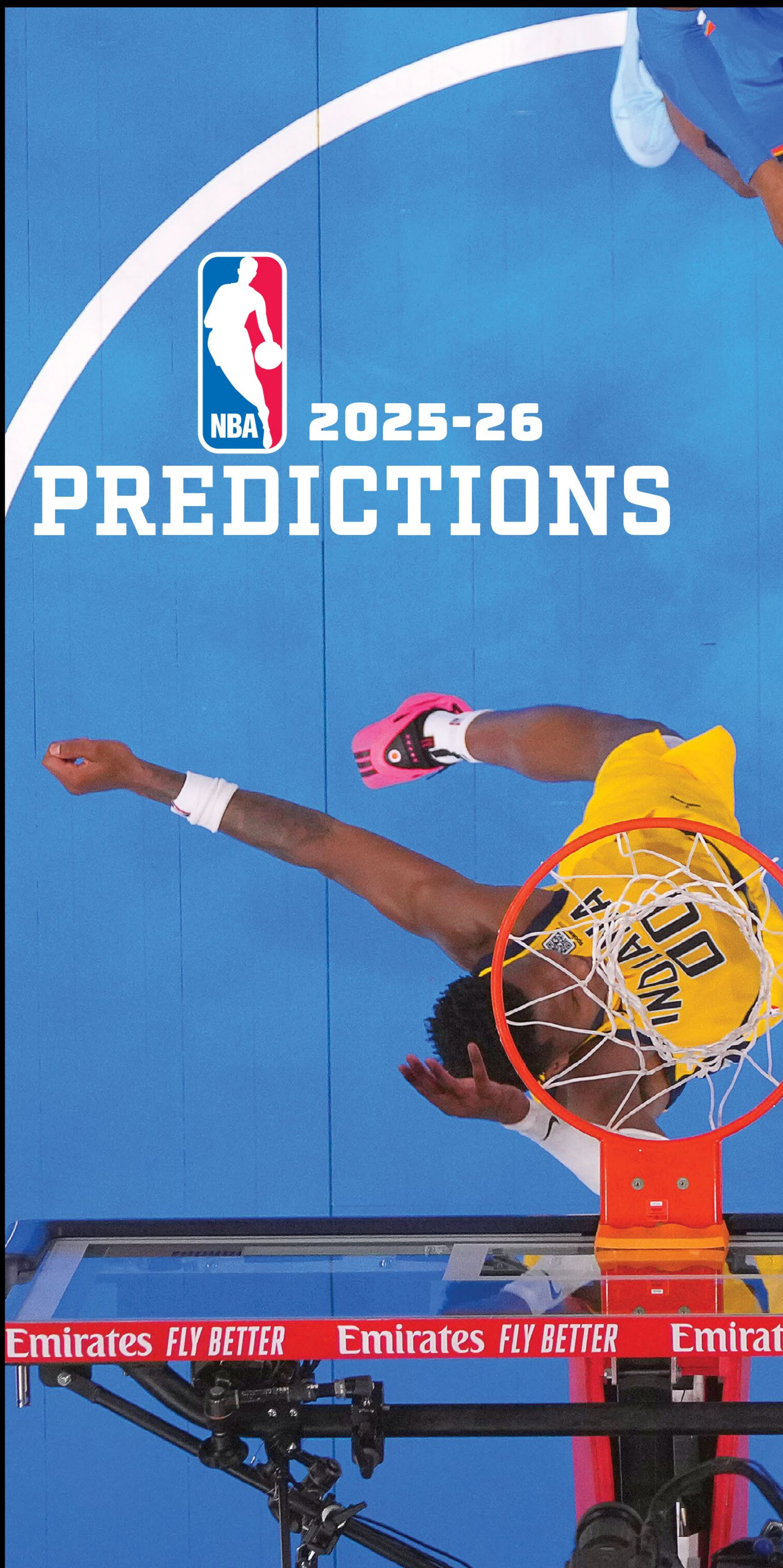
WESTERN CONFERENCE FINALS
OKLAHOMA CITY OVER DENVER

NBA FINALS
OKLAHOMA CITY
OVER CLEVELAND

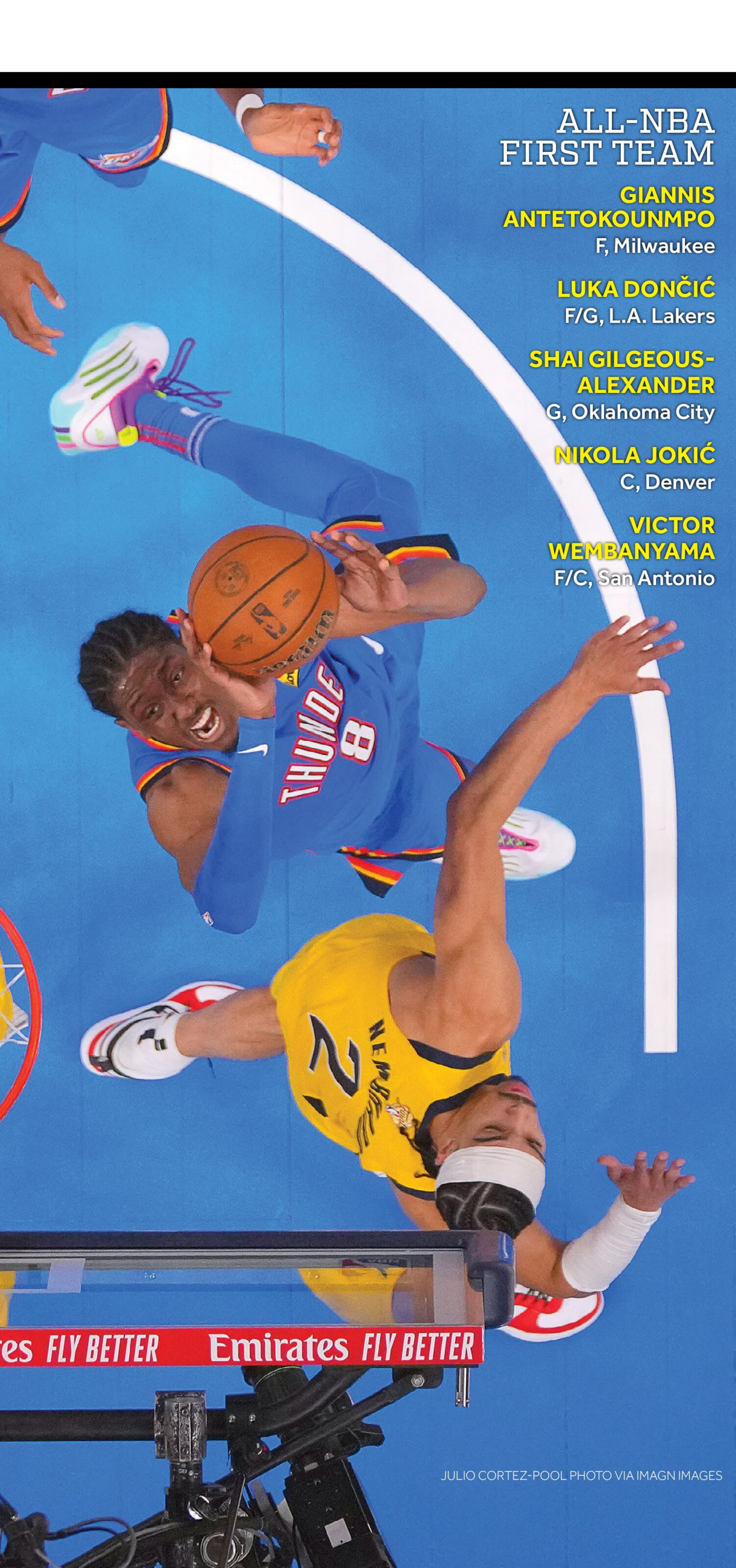


2025-26

PREDICTIONS



Emirates FLY BETTER **Emirates FLY BETTER** **Emirat**



ALL-NBA FIRST TEAM

**GIANNIS
ANTETOKOUNMPO**
F, Milwaukee

LUKA DONČIĆ
F/G, L.A. Lakers

**SHAI GILGEOUS-
ALEXANDER**
G, Oklahoma City

NIKOLA JOKIĆ
C, Denver

**VICTOR
WEMBANYAMA**
F/C, San Antonio

ALL-NBA SECOND TEAM

JALEN BRUNSON
G, New York

ANTHONY DAVIS
F/C, Dallas

ANTHONY EDWARDS
G, Minnesota

DONOVAN MITCHELL
G, Cleveland

JALEN WILLIAMS
G/F, Oklahoma City

ALL-NBA THIRD TEAM

PAOLO BANCHERO
F, Orlando

CADE CUNNINGHAM
G, Detroit

STEPHEN CURRY
G, Golden State

KEVIN DURANT
F, Houston

LEBRON JAMES
F, L.A. Lakers

Most Valuable Player

NIKOLA JOKIĆ, DENVER

Coach of the Year

JAMAHL MOSLEY, ORLANDO

Rookie of the Year

COOPER FLAGG, DALLAS

POWER RANKINGS

EASTERN CONFERENCE

1. Cavaliers
2. Magic
3. Hawks
4. Knicks
5. Pistons
6. Bucks
7. Pacers
8. Heat
9. Bulls
10. Celtics
11. 76ers
12. Raptors
13. Hornets
14. Nets
15. Wizards

WESTERN CONFERENCE

1. Thunder
2. Rockets
3. Nuggets
4. Timberwolves
5. Lakers
6. Clippers
7. Warriors
8. Spurs
9. Mavericks
10. Trail Blazers
11. Grizzlies
12. Pelicans
13. Kings
14. Suns
15. Jazz

JULIO CORTEZ-POOL PHOTO VIA IMAGN IMAGES



BOS CELTICS

ATLANTIC DIVISION PREDICTION: 2ND

Two years ago, the Celtics looked poised to be a dynastic championship team. Jayson Tatum's devastating Achilles tear during the 2025 playoffs, which will keep him out for the 2025-26 season, has put a temporary pause on that plan. This is going to be a challenging campaign without him.

Boston is clearly treating this upcoming season as a sort of gap year. Originally slated to pay more than \$200 million in luxury taxes, the Celtics have trimmed their roster considerably to reduce that number.

Gone are Jrue Holiday, Kristaps Porziņģis, Al Horford and Luke Kornet. The Celtics did add scorer Anfernee Simons along with some other low-end signings, but they have a much worse roster this season with one of the weakest benches in the league.

Jaylen Brown and Derrick White are still around to try to keep Boston in the playoff hunt in a weak Eastern Conference. But without Tatum and the rest of the crew, this team is going to experience a massive decline.

FRONTCOURT

Celtics diehards might be holding out hope that this team can still be pretty good. They simply need to take a look at the center rotation to get a dose of reality.

Xavier Tillman and Neemias Queta, who were the fourth- and fifth-string bigs, respectively, last season, will fight for a starting position. Neither is qualified to play big minutes in the league, but they're all that's left on this roster. The duo's lack of scoring ability may force the team away from its five-out strategy of positioning everyone outside of the 3-point line.

Free-agent acquisition Luka Garza will also be in the center mix. He's a talented scorer who has worked on developing a 3-pointer, but he has defensive limitations.

The team is also thin at power forward. Long-time Raptors bench big Chris Boucher will likely get the starting nod, adding shooting to the lineup. Sam Hauser competes defensively and can shoot it as well. Both are limited role players who are better suited as reserves on most teams. Jordan Walsh and Josh Minott are completely unproven options behind them.

In short, the bigs present a real problem for Boston. It's genuinely difficult to identify a clear starting center or even a cohesive front-court rotation.

On the bright side, Brown will start at small forward and should have another terrific season. His defense took a step back last season,

SCOUTING THE CELTICS

ANONYMOUS TAKES
FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

"I can't believe how fast this fell apart. ... They went from a title threat to a team that might be in the lottery in about two months. ... Trading Kristaps Porziņģis and Jrue Holiday made sense financially, but you can't just replace that production and chemistry. ... Losing Al Horford is another hit, especially when you factor in Jayson Tatum being out with the Achilles. ... That's three starters and their best player gone. ... Jaylen Brown will put up numbers, but he's going to be asked to carry a load we've never seen him carry. ... They've got some decent young pieces, but not nearly enough to scare anyone in the East this year."



JAYLEN
BROWN

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Record: 36-36	Record: 51-31	Record: 57-25	Record: 64-18	Record: 61-21
Division: 4th	Division: 1st	Division: 1st	Division: 1st	Division: 1st



DERRICK WHITE

BEYOND THE ARC

(DERRICK) WHITE ALE Plenty of NBA players have their own wine labels. How about their own beer from Sam Adams? Derrick White got the honor last season, with the creation of a beer that combined “refreshing coriander and orange peel with adventurous spices like rose hips and tamarind.”

SPLASHER THAN THE SPLASH BROTHERS The 2024-25 Celtics broke the record for 3-pointers made, hitting 1,457 on the year. That’s 93 more than the previous record held by the Golden State Warriors in Klay Thompson and Stephen Curry’s last season together. Don’t expect Boston to challenge that mark again this year.

STARSTRUCK OWNER Bill Chisholm bought the Celtics at a stunning \$6.1 billion valuation at the end of last season. He’s a lifelong diehard who heaped praise on his president of basketball operations upon meeting him for the first time. “I’m starstruck first of all,” Chisholm said. “Brad Stevens is a basketball genius.”

TD GARDEN IS TURNT UP The Celtics are known for having a great crowd. Opponents have noticed, as Jayson Tatum told Jared Weiss of *The Athletic* last season. “I was at the free throw line and CJ McCollum asked me, ‘Is it always this turnt up in here?’ I was like, ‘Yeah.’”

and he hopes to return to where he was during the team’s championship run. They will need him to pick up his scoring, too, in Tatum’s absence. He should be up to the task.

There’s not much behind Brown. Hauser and 2024 first-round pick Baylor Scheierman can try to give him a breather. If Brown misses any time, then the Celtics could see their season quickly derail.

Tatum was the piece that tied this whole unit together. His defensive versatility gave the team an option to put on elite wings and even opposing centers. And he was the ironman who took the heaviest burden of the team’s offense. Without him, this simply isn’t the same team.

BACKCOURT

White has been in the All-Star conversation in recent seasons but has never scored enough points to garner true consideration. This could be his breakthrough year in that regard.

He’s going to have to take on a much bigger role because he is now one of the team’s best offensive players. He will always bring shooting, passing and elite defense. He’s the best shot-blocking guard in the league. He will have to create more shots now, too.

Simons is the new kid on the block, and he can also generate good looks. He was one of the most prolific pull-up shooters in the league with the Portland Trail Blazers. He can take some of those bail-out shots that Tatum was responsible for in previous years.

Simons is a talented scorer, but he’s been one of the worst defenders at his position in the league over the past several seasons. Maybe head coach Joe Mazzulla’s intensity will get through to him in a way that previous coaches didn’t. If not, he could be a midseason trade candidate, allowing the team to shed even more salary and get further under the luxury tax.

Payton Pritchard should get a bigger role too. Last year’s Sixth Man of the Year took a huge

////
\$9.4
MILLION

The Celtics have already cut a ton of money off their books. Don’t be surprised if they keep on cutting down their roster.

They’re still about \$9.4 million over the luxury tax heading into the season, and they won’t want to overpay for a mediocre team. Anfernee Simons is the most likely candidate to depart due to his expiring salary.



Anfernee Simons ////

OFFSEASON MOVES

DRAFT PICKS

1 HUGO GONZÁLEZ

G, 6-6, 200, Real Madrid

2 AMARI WILLIAMS

F/C, 6-11, 250, Kentucky

2 MAX SHULGA

G/F, 6-5, 210, VCU

The Celtics took González with the No. 28 pick. They also traded for Williams at pick No. 46 and Shulga at pick No. 57. González is a big guard who shows promise in pick-and-rolls but doesn’t possess great athleticism. Williams is a center with great size and defensive ability. Shulga shot the ball well through five years of college

OTHER NEWCOMERS

Anfernee Simons was the big trade acquisition. Chris Boucher was a bargain signing towards the end of free agency. Luka Garza arrives on a two-year, \$5.3 million contract after riding the bench with the Minnesota Timberwolves over the past three seasons.

ROSTER							2024-25 STATISTICS										48-MINUTE PRODUCTIVITY		
HEAD COACH: JOE MAZZULLA (4TH SEASON; CAREER: 182-64)																			
#	PLAYER	POS	HT	WT	DOB	FROM	YRS	G	MPG	FG%	3P%	FT%	RPG	APG	PPG		REB	AST	PTS
0	Jayson Tatum	F/G	6-8	210	3/03/98	Duke	8	72	36.4	.452	.343	.814	8.7	6.0	26.8		11.4	7.9	35.3
7	Jaylen Brown	G/F	6-6	223	10/24/96	California	9	63	34.3	.463	.324	.764	5.8	4.5	22.2		8.2	6.4	31.1
1	Anfernee Simons	G	6-3	200	6/08/99	Edgewater (FL) HS	7	70	32.7	.426	.363	.902	2.7	4.8	19.3		4.0	7.1	28.2
9	Derrick White	G	6-4	190	7/02/94	Colorado	8	76	33.9	.442	.384	.839	4.5	4.8	16.4		6.4	6.7	23.3
11	Payton Pritchard	G	6-1	195	1/28/98	Oregon	5	80	28.4	.472	.407	.845	3.8	3.5	14.3		6.5	5.9	24.2
25	Chris Boucher	F	6-9	200	1/11/93	Oregon	8	50	17.2	.492	.363	.782	4.5	0.7	10.0		12.5	1.8	27.9
30	Sam Hauser	F	6-7	217	12/08/97	Virginia	4	71	21.7	.451	.416	1.000	3.2	0.9	8.5		7.0	2.0	18.8
88	Neemias Queta	C	7-0	248	7/13/99	Utah State	4	62	13.9	.650	.000	.754	3.8	0.7	5.0		13.1	2.5	17.2
55	Baylor Scheierman	G	6-6	205	9/26/00	Creighton	1	31	12.4	.355	.317	.750	2.1	1.1	3.6		8.1	4.1	14.1
55	Luka Garza	C	6-10	243	12/27/98	Iowa	4	39	5.6	.495	.278	.686	1.4	0.3	3.5		11.8	2.4	30.2
8	Josh Minott	F	6-8	205	11/25/02	Memphis	3	46	6.0	.489	.326	.895	1.0	0.4	2.6		8.2	3.1	20.7
27	Jordan Walsh	G	6-6	205	3/03/04	Arkansas	2	52	7.8	.361	.273	.583	1.3	0.4	1.6		8.2	2.3	9.8
26	Xavier Tillman	F	6-7	245	1/12/99	Michigan State	5	33	7.0	.245	.156	.750	1.3	0.2	1.0		8.9	1.5	7.1
28	Hugo González	G	6-6	200	2/05/06	Real Madrid													
	Hayden Gray	G	6-4	190	5/11/03	UC San Diego													
	RJ Luis Jr.	F	6-7	215	11/27/02	St. John's													
29	Max Shulga	G	6-5	210	6/25/02	VCU													
77	Amari Williams	F/C	6-11	250	1/28/02	Kentucky													



PAYTON PRITCHARD

leap with his offensive production and found ways not to be a defensive liability. He could challenge Simons for that last starting spot or fill in if the team decides to trade Simons away.

After Pritchard, the bench depth falls off completely. Rookies Hugo González and Max Shulga may get opportunities. Neither is likely to be an NBA-caliber player in his first year. Scheierman will also get opportunities there.

FINAL ANALYSIS

The Celtics still have enough of the familiar big names still around to remain relevant. But their complete lack of depth is going to sink them in the regular season.

If everything breaks perfectly, Brown stays totally healthy, Simons looks better in a new situation and Mazzulla proves that he can work miracles with a flawed roster, then maybe the Celtics can break into the top six of the Eastern Conference.

It's more likely, though, that this season gets ugly. The Celtics could end up fighting for a Play-In Tournament spot in a very weak conference or even miss the tournament completely.

The front office seems to understand this problem. The team could be forced to pivot midseason, focusing more on developing its young players and securing a great pick in a strong 2026 draft. The loss of core talent, coupled with financial constraints and a reliance on unproven players, points to a challenging season ahead

All isn't lost for the Celtics, though. Tatum will come back next season. They will be in a much better financial position at that point, and they should be able to get back to contender status very quickly.

2025-26 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 22	Philadelphia	7:30
Oct. 24	at New York	7:30
Oct. 26	at Detroit	3:30
Oct. 27	at New Orleans	8:00
Oct. 29	Cleveland	7:00
Oct. 31	at Philadelphia*	7:00

NOVEMBER

Nov. 1	Houston	8:00
Nov. 3	Utah	7:30
Nov. 5	Washington	7:30
Nov. 7	at Orlando*	7:00
Nov. 9	at Orlando	6:00
Nov. 11	at Philadelphia	8:00
Nov. 12	Memphis	7:30
Nov. 16	L.A. Clippers	3:30
Nov. 18	at Brooklyn	7:30
Nov. 21	Brooklyn*	7:30
Nov. 23	Orlando	6:00
Nov. 26	Detroit*	5:00
Nov. 29	at Minnesota	5:00
Nov. 30	at Cleveland	6:00

DECEMBER

Dec. 2	New York	8:00
Dec. 4	at Washington	7:00
Dec. 5	L.A. Lakers	7:00
Dec. 7	at Toronto	3:30
Dec. 9, 10	Emirates NBA Cup Quarterfinals	
Dec. 13	Emirates NBA Cup Semifinals	
Dec. 16	Emirates NBA Cup Championship	
Dec. 19	Miami	7:00

Dec. 20	at Toronto	7:00
Dec. 22	Indiana	7:30
Dec. 26	at Indiana	7:30
Dec. 28	at Portland	6:00
Dec. 30	at Utah	9:00

JANUARY

Jan. 1	at Sacramento	10:00
Jan. 3	at L.A. Clippers	10:30
Jan. 5	Chicago	7:30
Jan. 7	Denver	7:30
Jan. 9	Toronto	7:00
Jan. 10	San Antonio	8:00
Jan. 12	at Indiana	7:30
Jan. 15	at Miami	7:30
Jan. 17	at Atlanta	7:30
Jan. 19	at Detroit	8:00
Jan. 21	Indiana	7:30
Jan. 23	at Brooklyn	7:30
Jan. 24	at Chicago	8:00
Jan. 26	Portland	8:00
Jan. 28	Atlanta	7:30
Jan. 30	Sacramento	7:30

FEBRUARY

Feb. 1	Milwaukee	3:30
Feb. 3	at Dallas	8:00
Feb. 4	at Houston	8:00
Feb. 6	Miami	7:30
Feb. 8	New York	12:30
Feb. 11	Chicago	7:30
Feb. 19	at Golden State	10:00
Feb. 22	at L.A. Lakers	6:30

Feb. 24	at Phoenix	9:00
Feb. 25	at Denver	10:00
Feb. 27	Brooklyn	7:30

MARCH

March 1	Philadelphia	6:00
March 2	at Milwaukee	7:30
March 4	Charlotte	7:30
March 6	Dallas	7:00
March 8	at Cleveland	1:00
March 10	at San Antonio	8:00
March 12	at Oklahoma City	9:30
March 14	Washington	6:00
March 16	Phoenix	8:00
March 18	Golden State	7:00
March 20	at Memphis	8:00
March 22	Minnesota	8:00
March 25	Oklahoma City	7:30
March 27	Atlanta	7:30
March 29	at Charlotte	6:00
March 30	at Atlanta	7:30

APRIL

April 1	at Miami	7:30
April 3	at Milwaukee	8:00
April 5	Toronto	3:30
April 7	Charlotte	7:30
April 9	at New York	7:30
April 10	New Orleans	7:30
April 12	Orlando	6:00

*Emirates NBA Cup regular-season game
All times Eastern



BKN NETS

ATLANTIC DIVISION PREDICTION: 5TH

Following a season filled with speculation about draft positioning and star trades, the Brooklyn Nets have committed to a full rebuild entering the 2025-26 campaign. General manager Sean Marks made history during June's NBA draft, making an NBA-record five first-round picks, including Brooklyn's first lottery selection since 2010.

The Nets' decision to select BYU point guard Egor Dëmin with the No. 8 pick shocked many draft analysts. Their selections of two other international point guards in Nolan Traoré (No. 19) and Ben Saraf (No. 26) drew similar skepticism. Brooklyn also brought in North Carolina wing Drake Powell (No. 22) and Michigan big man Danny Wolf (No. 27).

Marks continued a busy offseason by trading Cameron Johnson, Brooklyn's top player, to the Denver Nuggets for Michael Porter Jr. and an unprotected 2032 first-round pick. He also acquired Terance Mann, Haywood Highsmith and draft picks in separate salary dumps.

As was the case last season, draft position and player development will be the Nets' main focuses in 2025-26. The team traded four first-round picks to the Houston Rockets last summer to reacquire its 2025 and 2026 first-rounders. Yet, the Nets didn't see much of a payoff at this year's draft. They landed the sixth-best lottery odds and fell to the No. 8 pick.

Brooklyn should display greater urgency to maximize its lottery odds this season and justify its trade with Houston. The development of the Nets' rookies and other young prospects, such as Noah Clowney and Dariq Whitehead, should also be a top focus for fans throughout the season.

FRONTCOURT

Nic Claxton returns as the leader of Brooklyn's frontcourt and the team's longest-tenured player. The 26-year-old struggled to make an impact last season while battling injuries. He posted a +1.2 defensive rating while shooting 56.3% from the field, the lowest marks since his rookie season. After the season, Claxton said he was still battling a back injury that he suffered last summer. The Georgia product will attempt to regain the explosiveness and motor this season that made him one of the NBA's best centers during the 2022-23 campaign.

Day'Ron Sharpe will return as Claxton's backup after signing a two-year, \$12 million contract. The 23-year-old is coming off a career-best season in which he posted the NBA's second-highest offensive rebounding percentage among players to play more than 600 minutes. He also posted a -6.7 defensive rating, ranking sixth among centers with the same playing time threshold, per CleaningTheGlass.

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Record: 48-24 Division: 2nd	Record: 44-38 Division: 4th	Record: 45-37 Division: 4th	Record: 32-50 Division: 4th	Record: 26-56 Division: 4th

SCOUTING THE NETS

ANONYMOUS TAKES FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

"I'm a little surprised they kept all five first-round picks. But I don't think it's a bad idea. ... This is actually how you build a team. ... It was time to move on from Cameron Johnson, but he's a pro's pro. His calmness will be missed in the locker room and on the court. ... It will be interesting to see Michael Porter Jr. in a leadership role.

He was always the quieter type in Denver. ... Cam Thomas was unsigned late into the offseason, and it seemed to get a little contentious. I'd probably look to trade him. He's gifted and can get them out of jams, but he shoots too much. ... They're headed for another year of playing the lottery."



NIC
CLAXTON

FROM LEFT: VINCENT CARCHIETTA-IMAGN IMAGES; PETRE THOMAS-IMAGN IMAGES



CAM THOMAS

BEYOND THE ARC

DĚMIN'S DEVELOPMENT

Egor DĚmin dominated the ball as BYU's starting point guard last season. However, with a 6-foot-10 wingspan, he has the size to play on the wing. DĚmin has changed his view of himself: "I got a little too deep into calling myself a point guard. Now, I prefer to say I'm a playmaker. I just really want to learn how to make plays. ...

There are playmakers on the court who are not point guards, and that's where I see myself at. I really want to be all over the court."

CAM'S CONUNDRUM

Following last season, Cam Thomas said that he felt he'd been "one of the best guards in the league" when given minutes. He wants to be paid as such. However, with no teams outside of the Nets having cap space, Thomas has not had a market thus far in free agency. Brooklyn has reportedly offered him a two-year deal at around \$28 million with a team option. If Thomas is not keen on accepting, he can sign his one-year, \$6 million qualifying offer and become an unrestricted free agent next summer.

FERNÁNDEZ'S FORECAST

After spending recent seasons as a complementary piece, Michael Porter Jr. is eager to expand his offensive game with Brooklyn. Head coach Jordi Fernández will offer him that opportunity: "He's going to be asked to do things that he's never done before. Like, probably his usage and the shots he's going to take. And I think that's exciting. It should be exciting for him."

Noah Clowney should continue to see a featured role at power forward during his third season. The 21-year-old flashed encouraging 3-point shooting early in his second campaign, shooting 39.1% on 5.0 attempts per game over his first 23 appearances. However, he cooled off considerably while battling ankle injuries as the year progressed. Clowney’s ability to add muscle to his lanky frame and develop as a ball-handler will determine his viability as a power forward long-term.

Wolf projects to spend time at power forward and center during his rookie campaign. The Michigan star operated as a pick-and-roll ball-handler for much of last season. Whether he can carry over that success against NBA-level defenders and develop a consistent 3-point shot will be the main questions facing him in Brooklyn.

Drew Timme will enter training camp on a non-guaranteed contract and will battle for one of the Nets’ final roster spots.

BACKCOURT

The Nets have embraced a youth movement at point guard, moving on from veterans Dennis Schröder and D’Angelo Russell and bringing in Dëmin, Traoré and Saraf. Dëmin was widely regarded as the top passer in this year’s draft. However, he struggled as a ball-handler and self-creator when facing pressure at BYU and at this year’s Summer League.

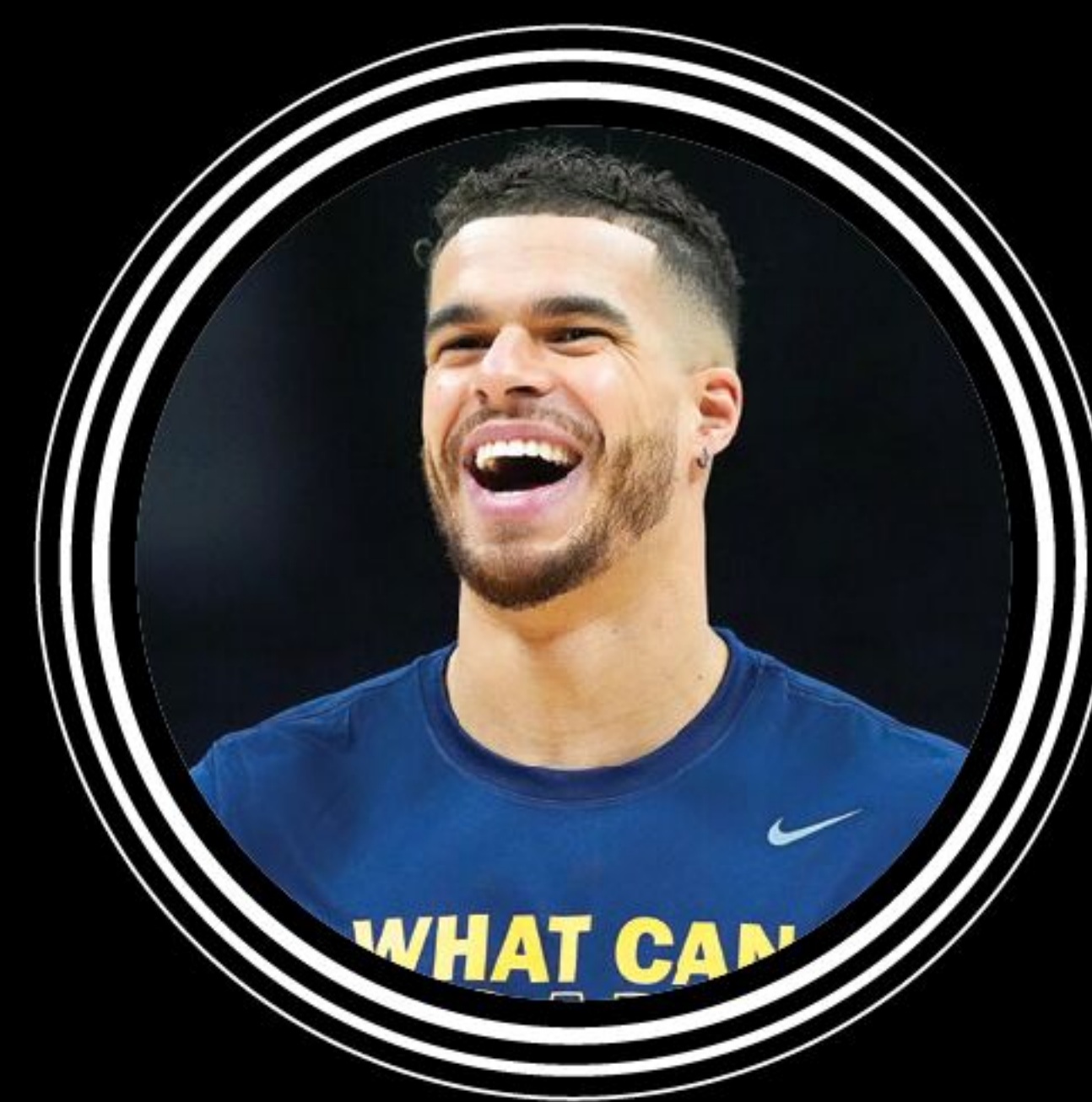
Cam Thomas’ shot creation and 3-point shooting will be essential to take pressure off Brooklyn’s rookie ball-handlers. The 23-year-old emerged as the team’s leading scorer over the past two seasons, averaging 22.9 points per game on 44/36/86 shooting splits. While he remains without a contract in restricted free agency, league sources expect him to be back with the Nets, whether on a short-term extension or the \$6 million qualifying offer.

Porter will also shoulder a heavy burden while stepping into an expanded offensive role. The 27-year-old’s floor spacing will be critical alongside Brooklyn’s rookie ball-handlers. Head coach Jordi

////
43.5

Egor Dëmin’s 3-point shot was a main concern among analysts entering this year’s draft. The Russian floor general shot just 27.3% at BYU.

However, after impressing during his pre-draft workouts, he shot 43.5% on 7.7 3-point attempts per game in the Summer League. Dëmin’s ability to sustain that improvement will be a storyline to monitor this season.



Michael Porter Jr. ////

OFFSEASON MOVES

DRAFT PICKS

1 EGOR DËMIN

PG, 6-9, 200, BYU

1 NOLAN TRAORÉ

PG, 6-4, 185, France

1 DRAKE POWELL

SF, 6-6, 195, North Carolina

1 BEN SARAF

PG, 6-6, 200, Israel

1 DANNY WOLF

PF/C, 6-11, 250, Michigan

Dëmin boasts incredible size and passing ability. Traoré is among the fastest players in the draft class. Powell’s athletic gifts make him an intriguing project as a three-and-D wing. Saraf flashes impressive skills as a sizable ball-handler and distributor. Wolf could contribute in a variety of ways.

OTHER NEWCOMERS

Michael Porter Jr. will try to rehabilitate his value after a salary dump by the Denver Nuggets, who acquired Cameron Johnson in return.

ROSTER																	48-MINUTE		
HEAD COACH: JORDI FERNÁNDEZ (2ND SEASON; CAREER: 26-56)																	PRODUCTIVITY		
#	PLAYER	POS	HT	WT	DOB	FROM	YRS	G	MPG	FG%	3P%	FT%	RPG	APG	PPG		REB	AST	PTS
24	Cam Thomas	G	6-3	210	10/13/01	LSU	4	25	31.2	.438	.349	.881	3.3	3.8	24.0		5.1	5.8	36.8
17	Michael Porter Jr.	F	6-10	218	6/29/98	Missouri	6	77	33.7	.504	.395	.768	7.0	2.1	18.2		10.0	3.1	25.9
26	Drew Timme	F	6-10	235	9/09/00	Gonzaga	1	9	28.2	.441	.257	.625	7.2	2.2	12.1		12.3	3.8	20.6
45	Keon Johnson	G	6-5	185	3/10/02	Tennessee	4	79	24.4	.389	.314	.770	3.8	2.2	10.6		7.4	4.4	20.9
33	Nic Claxton	C	6-11	215	4/17/99	Georgia	6	70	26.9	.563	.238	.513	7.4	2.2	10.3		13.1	4.0	18.5
8	Ziaire Williams	F	6-9	185	9/12/01	Stanford	4	63	24.5	.412	.341	.821	4.6	1.3	10.0		8.9	2.6	19.7
12	Tosan Evbuomwan	F	6-7	217	2/16/01	Princeton	2	28	23.7	.427	.312	.753	4.3	2.0	9.5		8.7	4.0	19.3
22	Jalen Wilson	F	6-6	220	11/04/00	Kansas	2	79	25.7	.397	.337	.818	3.4	1.8	9.5		6.4	3.4	17.7
21	Noah Clowney	F/C	6-9	210	7/14/04	Alabama	2	46	22.7	.358	.333	.838	3.9	0.9	9.1		8.3	1.8	19.3
13	Tyrese Martin	F	6-6	215	3/07/99	UConn	2	60	21.9	.406	.351	.793	3.7	2.0	8.7		8.0	4.5	19.1
10	Tyson Etienne	G	6-2	200	9/17/99	Wichita State	1	7	21.6	.327	.295	.800	1.3	1.7	7.9		2.9	3.8	17.5
20	Day’Ron Sharpe	C	6-9	265	11/06/01	North Carolina	4	50	18.1	.521	.244	.757	6.6	1.8	7.9		17.5	4.8	21.0
14	Terance Mann	G/F	6-5	215	10/18/96	Florida State	6	67	21.1	.496	.368	.691	3.0	1.8	7.7		6.8	4.1	17.5
8	Haywood Highsmith	F	6-5	220	12/09/96	Wheeling Jesuit	5	74	24.6	.458	.382	.721	3.4	1.5	6.5		6.7	3.0	12.6
0	Dariq Whitehead	G/F	6-6	220	8/01/04	Duke	2	20	12.3	.406	.446	.600	1.5	0.6	5.7		5.7	2.3	22.2
8	Egor Dëmin	G	6-9	200	3/03/06	BYU													
4	Drake Powell	G/F	6-6	195	9/08/05	North Carolina													
77	Ben Saraf	G	6-6	200	4/14/06	Ratiopharm Ulm													
19	Nolan Traoré	G	6-4	185	5/28/06	Saint-Quentin													
18	Danny Wolf	F	6-11	250	5/05/04	Michigan													



EGOR DĚMIN

Fernández also says he will offer the 6-foot-10 forward increased ball-handling opportunities. After news of the trade broke, Porter told reporters he was “excited to expand his offensive game” with Brooklyn.

Porter, Terance Mann, Highsmith, Ziaire Williams and Powell should enjoy featured roles on the wing. Mann and Highsmith will provide veteran 3-and-D contributions. Williams is coming off a career-best season following his trade from the Memphis Grizzlies. Meanwhile, Powell is one of the most athletic draft picks in Nets franchise history. The former 5-star recruit emerged as an elite defender at North Carolina and will have an opportunity to expand his offensive game with Brooklyn.

Whitehead, a 2023 first-round pick, should also receive the first extended NBA opportunity of his career. The third-year wing shot 44.6% from 3-point range over 20 appearances last season. However, following several lower-leg surgeries, he’s yet to regain the explosive athleticism that made him the nation’s No. 2-ranked prospect in the Class of 2022.

Looking further down the roster, Keon Johnson, Jalen Wilson and Tyrese Martin are on partially or non-guaranteed contracts and will battle for roster spots at training camp.

FINAL ANALYSIS

Overall, the Nets’ primary emphases remain draft position and player development during Year 2 of their rebuild. Fernández and his coaching staff will face the unprecedented task of developing five rookie first-round picks. They’ll also have to determine whether several returning players will be a part of Brooklyn’s long-term future. While the coaching staff will have plenty to worry about on the court, the front office will spend much of the season monitoring the draft lottery standings while angling for a top selection.

2025-26 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 22	at Charlotte	7:00
Oct. 24	Cleveland	7:30
Oct. 26	at San Antonio	2:00
Oct. 27	at Houston	8:00
Oct. 29	Atlanta	7:30

NOVEMBER

Nov. 2	Philadelphia	6:00
Nov. 3	Minnesota	7:00
Nov. 5	at Indiana	7:00
Nov. 7	Detroit*	7:30
Nov. 9	at New York	6:00
Nov. 11	Toronto	7:30
Nov. 14	at Orlando*	7:00
Nov. 16	at Washington	6:00
Nov. 18	Boston	7:30
Nov. 21	at Boston*	7:30
Nov. 23	at Toronto	6:00
Nov. 24	New York	7:30
Nov. 28	Philadelphia*	7:30
Nov. 29	at Milwaukee	8:00

DECEMBER

Dec. 1	Charlotte	7:30
Dec. 3	at Chicago	8:00
Dec. 4	Utah	7:30
Dec. 6	New Orleans	5:00
Dec. 9, 10	Emirates NBA Cup Quarterfinals	
Dec. 13	Emirates NBA Cup Semifinals	
Dec. 16	Emirates NBA Cup Championship	
Dec. 18	Miami	7:30
Dec. 21	Toronto	6:00

Dec. 23	at Philadelphia	7:00
Dec. 27	at Minnesota	8:00
Dec. 29	Golden State	7:30

JANUARY

Jan. 1	Houston	6:00
Jan. 2	at Washington	7:00
Jan. 4	Denver	3:30
Jan. 7	Orlando	7:30
Jan. 9	L.A. Clippers	7:30
Jan. 11	at Memphis	3:30
Jan. 12	at Dallas	8:30
Jan. 14	at New Orleans	8:00
Jan. 16	Chicago	7:00
Jan. 18	at Chicago	7:00
Jan. 19	Phoenix	7:30
Jan. 21	at New York	7:30
Jan. 23	Boston	7:30
Jan. 25	at L.A. Clippers	9:00
Jan. 27	at Phoenix	9:00
Jan. 29	at Denver	9:00
Jan. 30	at Utah	9:30

FEBRUARY

Feb. 1	at Detroit	6:00
Feb. 3	L.A. Lakers	7:30
Feb. 5	at Orlando	7:00
Feb. 7	Washington	3:00
Feb. 9	Chicago	7:30
Feb. 11	Indiana	7:30
Feb. 19	at Cleveland	7:00
Feb. 20	at Oklahoma City	8:00
Feb. 22	at Atlanta	3:30

Feb. 24	Dallas	7:30
Feb. 26	San Antonio	7:30
Feb. 27	at Boston	7:30

MARCH

March 1	Cleveland	3:30
March 3	at Miami	7:30
March 5	at Miami	7:30
March 7	at Detroit	6:00
March 9	Memphis	7:30
March 10	Detroit	7:30
March 12	at Atlanta	7:30
March 14	at Philadelphia	1:00
March 16	Portland	7:30
March 18	Oklahoma City	7:30
March 20	New York	7:30
March 22	at Sacramento	6:00
March 23	at Portland	10:00
March 25	at Golden State	10:00
March 27	at L.A. Lakers	10:30
March 29	Sacramento	6:00
March 31	Charlotte	7:30

APRIL

April 3	Atlanta	7:30
April 5	Washington	3:30
April 7	Milwaukee	7:30
April 9	Indiana	7:30
April 10	at Milwaukee	8:00
April 12	at Toronto	6:00

**Emirates NBA Cup regular-season game
All times Eastern*



NOW KNICKS

ATLANTIC DIVISION PREDICTION: **1ST**

Coming off the most successful season they had experienced in a quarter-century, the New York Knicks grappled with failure. The failure to close out Game 1 of a conference finals that may haunt them for years to come. The failure to utilize their newly fortified roster as effectively as possible. And most of all, the failure to take full advantage of an opportunity they had fought so hard for.

These collective failures ultimately led to the dismissal of head coach Tom Thibodeau, and with it, the start of a new era in New York.

Even with a roster that is largely the same as last year's, the 2025-26 Knicks are stepping into the unknown. Perhaps no coach in recent memory has defined a team as much as Thibs defined the current Knicks, both in style of play and the larger approach to an NBA season. Now, with Mike Brown leading a coaching staff consisting of some holdovers and some new additions, collaboration is the name of the game.

That is as true on the court as off of it. In addition to guiding a staff that will contain both an offensive (new associate head coach Chris Jent, formerly of the Charlotte Hornets) and defensive coordinator (the Los Angeles Clippers' Brendan O'Connor), Brown will be expected to implement some of the passing-centric and movement-heavy offense that defined his record-setting Sacramento attack from a few years ago. Like many coaches before him, Brown's success will largely depend on the level of buy-in he receives from his most prominent players.

FRONTCOURT

Coming off an All-NBA season and entering Year 11 in the league, Karl-Anthony Towns remains as much of a wild card as ever. On one hand, he had perhaps his best overall season on offense and then translated that production into some massive postseason performances. On the other, there were times when it felt like he was the primary culprit when the Knicks simply couldn't get stops. His playoff inconsistency also carried over from past years.

The jury is out on the trade that sent Julius Randle, Donte DiVincenzo and a 2025 first-rounder to the Minnesota Timberwolves as part of the deal for Towns roughly one year ago. The regular season will not only be a testing ground for whether Brown can get more consistency out of KAT on defense, but also on whether he'll take on an offensive role similar to that of Domantas Sabonis in Sacramento. If Towns can function as more of a hub, it could go a long way to energizing an offense that got stagnant far too often last year.

SCOUTING THE KNICKS

ANONYMOUS TAKES
FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

"The coaching change from Tom Thibodeau to Mike Brown caught me a little off-guard. I wasn't shocked, though, after watching the playoffs and questioning a few of Thibs' decisions. ... Brown's a smart coach, but he's had trouble in the past getting players to fully buy into his system. ... Jalen Brunson is dynamic, but he could stand to look to pass more. ... Karl-Anthony Towns can dominate stretches, then vanish just as quickly. ... Jordan Clarkson gives them scoring pop off the bench. ... Mikal Bridges and OG Anunoby should see the ball more, but with a ball-dominant point guard, I'm not sure how you make all those pieces click for a title. ... No doubt, though, they're loaded."



KARL-ANTHONY
TOWNS

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Record: 41-31	Record: 37-45	Record: 47-35	Record: 50-32	Record: 51-31
Division: 3rd	Division: 5th	Division: 3rd	Division: 2nd	Division: 2nd



JALEN BRUNSON



BEYOND THE ARC

MONEY MITCH? One unresolved issue from the summer is a new contract for Mitchell Robinson. If he extends, the longest-tenured Knick could become the first player since Charlie Ward to remain with the franchise for 10 years or more. He's about to enter Year 8, and judging by the playoffs, his best is yet to come.

MOST VALUABLE PODCAST Since its inception, the "Roommates" podcast — hosted by longtime friends and teammates Jalen Brunson and Josh Hart — has ranked among the most listened-to basketball podcasts in the country. The one big guest they haven't had on yet? Leon Rose, who hasn't spoken to the assembled media since taking his current job of Knicks president. We'll see if Brunson can get his godfather on the show before the year ends.

HOF KAT? Karl-Anthony Towns, Hall of Famer? After a third All-NBA nod and fifth All-Star selection, the soon-to-be 30-year-old big man has an outside shot at that most rarefied air. Another batch of individual honors will go a long way to making it happen, but not as much as finally putting forth a truly dominant postseason run — perhaps all the way to the NBA Finals.

SETTING THE PACE Nothing has defined the modern Knicks more than their slow play. They've been in the bottom six of the NBA in pace for the past six years and haven't ranked higher than 17th since the 2011-12 season. New head coach Mike Brown has already talked about wanting to play faster. Something's gotta give.



Of course, the nature of Towns' usage on both ends of the floor will largely depend on whether he's starting at center or power forward. To that end, Mitchell Robinson enters this season fully healthy and coming off the best stretch of his career. Robinson remains one of the best drop defenders in basketball and is arguably the best offensive rebounder in the league. Regardless of whether he starts or not, he'll play ample minutes with KAT, providing the Knicks with two completely different looks that each give opponents unique fits. Last year's fifth starter, Josh Hart, should slot seamlessly into a sixth man role if that's the direction Brown decides to go.

OG Anunoby will continue to be a reliable presence on the wing, wreaking havoc on D and knocking down 3-pointers on offense. Keeping him involved in the offense remains a must, especially after a month-long stretch in the spring when his dribble-drive game reached new heights. Off the bench, offseason addition Guerschon Yabusele will give the Knicks another 4/5 hybrid who can stretch the floor, especially from above the break.

BACKCOURT

For some players, like the newly extended Mikal Bridges, the coaching change figures to be extremely positive. For someone like Jalen Brunson, a bigger adjustment may be in store.

Any conversation about the Knicks has to begin with Brunson, the former Dallas Mavericks reserve who has catapulted himself into annual MVP discussions. Over the past two seasons, he has had stretches of being one of the most ball-dominant players in the league, which by and large has led to both personal and team success.

His ability to have a similar impact in a more motion-heavy offense is perhaps the single most important variable when it comes to projecting New York's ceiling. It would be foolish to doubt a player who has overcome countless challenges and cleared numerous hurdles, but for the Knicks to achieve their ultimate goal, Brunson may need to raise his game yet again.

Not far behind on the list of questions is whether Bridges can be the player the Knicks thought

-1.4

That's the net rating of New York's starters after Jan. 1 despite playing the second-most minutes of any five-man unit in basketball. They were even worse (-6.2) in the playoffs. Of all the challenges new head coach Mike Brown faces, getting his best players on the same page easily tops the list.



Jordan Clarkson

OFFSEASON MOVES

DRAFT PICKS
2 MOHAMED DIAWARA
SF, 6-9, 225, Cholet Basket (LNB Elite)

Even though he's New York's only 2025 draft pick, Diawara profiles as the longest of long-term projects. An impressive Summer League performance may garner him a two-way contract, but don't expect to see much of him on the court this season.

OTHER NEWCOMERS
The Knicks should get help from free-agent additions Jordan Clarkson and Guerschon Yabusele, two offense-first players who will look to make the league's fifth-ranked offense even more potent. Look for Landry Shamet, a free agent expected to re-sign, to contend for a roster spot after an impressive postseason performance.

ROSTER							2024-25 STATISTICS										48-MINUTE PRODUCTIVITY		
HEAD COACH: MIKE BROWN (1ST SEASON; CAREER: 454-304)																			
#	PLAYER	POS	HT	WT	DOB	FROM	YRS	G	MPG	FG%	3P%	FT%	RPG	APG	PPG		REB	AST	PTS
11	Jalen Brunson	G	6-2	190	8/31/96	Villanova	7	65	35.4	.488	.383	.821	2.9	7.3	26.0		3.9	9.9	35.3
32	Karl-Anthony Towns	C/F	7-0	248	11/15/95	Kentucky	10	72	35.0	.526	.420	.829	12.8	3.1	24.4		17.5	4.2	33.5
8	OG Anunoby	F/G	6-7	240	7/17/97	Indiana	8	74	36.6	.476	.372	.810	4.8	2.2	18.0		6.4	2.9	23.6
25	Mikal Bridges	G/F	6-6	209	8/30/96	Villanova	7	82	37.0	.500	.354	.814	3.2	3.7	17.6		4.1	4.8	22.8
00	Jordan Clarkson	G	6-3	194	6/07/92	Missouri	11	37	26.0	.408	.362	.797	3.2	3.7	16.2		5.9	6.9	29.9
3	Josh Hart	G	6-4	215	3/06/95	Villanova	8	77	37.6	.525	.333	.776	9.6	5.9	13.6		12.2	7.5	17.4
28	Guerschon Yabusele	F	6-8	265	12/17/95	Maine Red Claws	3	70	27.1	.501	.380	.725	5.6	2.1	11.0		10.0	3.7	19.5
2	Miles McBride	G	6-1	195	9/08/00	West Virginia	4	64	24.9	.406	.369	.813	2.5	2.9	9.5		4.8	5.6	18.4
23	Mitchell Robinson	C/F	7-0	240	4/01/98	Western Kentucky	7	17	17.1	.661	.000	.684	5.9	0.8	5.1		16.7	2.2	14.4
13	Tyler Kolek	G	6-3	195	3/27/01	Marquette	1	41	7.2	.329	.298	.765	0.7	1.7	2.0		4.4	11.3	13.1
55	Ariel Hukporti	C	6-11	246	4/12/02	Riesen Ludwigsburg	1	25	8.7	.677	.000	.462	2.0	0.4	1.9		11.3	2.4	10.6
4	Pacôme Dadiet	F	6-8	210	7/27/05	Ratiopharm Ulm	1	18	6.2	.323	.316	.667	1.0	0.3	1.7		7.8	2.2	13.0
9	Kevin McCullar Jr.	G	6-6	210	3/15/01	Kansas	1	4	7.3	.286	.000	1.000	2.0	0.5	1.5		13.2	3.3	9.9
51	Mohamed Diawara	F	6-9	225	4/29/05	Paris Basketball		R — First NBA Season											



MIKAL BRIDGES

they were trading for last summer. Certain aspects of Bridges’ debut season at Madison Square Garden — most notably his extreme aversion to contact and his plummeting accuracy from above the break — had nothing to do with the larger offensive ecosystem. Thibodeau could never find a happy medium between Bridges’ dominating the ball and stoically spacing the floor. A revamped offense should help him discover a tenable middle ground. Defensively, Bridges chased ball-handlers through and around screens more than any player in basketball. It’ll be interesting to see whether Brown can devise more ways for the seven-year veteran to make an impact off the ball, which has always been his specialty.

Off the bench, both Miles McBride and Jordan Clarkson bring different ingredients to the mix. Clarkson’s defensive liabilities may limit how often he can share the court with Brunson against certain opponents, but the Knicks have been desperate for another shot creator in this mold for years. As for McBride, the second-longest-tenured Knick surely heard the season-long calls for him to get more minutes last year. McBride is theoretically in contention for a starting spot this season, but he’ll more likely continue in his role as a primary bench cog who seems to improve every lineup he’s in.

FINAL ANALYSIS

The Knicks should have another year at or near the top of the conference, maybe even improving on last year’s 51 wins. If Brown’s offensive innovations take hold, there’s no reason that his team can’t represent the Eastern Conference in the NBA Finals for the first time since 1999. If the changes prove to be too big of an adjustment, far bigger changes are likely in store for the franchise.

2025-26 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 22	Cleveland	7:00
Oct. 24	Boston	7:30
Oct. 26	at Miami	6:00
Oct. 28	at Milwaukee	8:00
Oct. 31	at Chicago*	8:00

NOVEMBER

Nov. 2	Chicago	7:00
Nov. 3	Washington	7:30
Nov. 5	Minnesota	7:30
Nov. 9	Brooklyn	6:00
Nov. 11	Memphis	7:30
Nov. 12	Orlando	7:00
Nov. 14	Miami*	7:00
Nov. 17	at Miami	7:30
Nov. 19	at Dallas	9:30
Nov. 22	at Orlando	5:00
Nov. 24	at Brooklyn	7:30
Nov. 26	at Charlotte*	7:00
Nov. 28	Milwaukee*	7:30
Nov. 30	Toronto	6:00

DECEMBER

Dec. 2	at Boston	8:00
Dec. 3	Charlotte	7:30
Dec. 5	Utah	7:30
Dec. 7	Orlando	12:00
Dec. 9, 10	Emirates NBA Cup Quarterfinals	
Dec. 13	Emirates NBA Cup Semifinals	
Dec. 16	Emirates NBA Cup Championship	
Dec. 18	at Indiana	7:00
Dec. 19	Philadelphia	7:00

Dec. 21	Miami	6:00
Dec. 23	at Minnesota	8:00
Dec. 25	Cleveland	12:00
Dec. 27	at Atlanta	8:00
Dec. 29	at New Orleans	8:00
Dec. 31	at San Antonio	7:00

JANUARY

Jan. 2	Atlanta	7:30
Jan. 3	Philadelphia	7:30
Jan. 5	at Detroit	7:00
Jan. 7	L.A. Clippers	7:30
Jan. 9	at Phoenix	9:00
Jan. 11	at Portland	6:00
Jan. 14	at Sacramento	10:00
Jan. 15	at Golden State	10:00
Jan. 17	Phoenix	7:30
Jan. 19	Dallas	5:00
Jan. 21	Brooklyn	7:30
Jan. 24	at Philadelphia	3:00
Jan. 27	Sacramento	7:30
Jan. 28	at Toronto	7:30
Jan. 30	Portland	7:30

FEBRUARY

Feb. 1	L.A. Lakers	7:00
Feb. 3	at Washington	7:00
Feb. 4	Denver	7:00
Feb. 6	at Detroit	7:30
Feb. 8	at Boston	12:30
Feb. 10	Indiana	7:30
Feb. 11	at Philadelphia	7:30
Feb. 19	Detroit	7:30

Feb. 21	Houston	8:30
Feb. 22	at Chicago	8:00
Feb. 24	at Cleveland	8:00
Feb. 27	at Milwaukee	8:00

MARCH

March 1	San Antonio	1:00
March 3	at Toronto	7:30
March 4	Oklahoma City	7:00
March 6	at Denver	9:00
March 8	at L.A. Lakers	3:30
March 9	at L.A. Clippers	10:00
March 11	at Utah	9:00
March 13	at Indiana	7:30
March 15	Golden State	8:00
March 17	Indiana	7:30
March 18	at Memphis	8:00
March 20	at Brooklyn	7:30
March 22	Washington	7:30
March 24	New Orleans	7:30
March 26	at Charlotte	7:00
March 29	at Oklahoma City	7:30
March 31	at Houston	8:00

APRIL

April 3	Chicago	7:30
April 6	at Atlanta	7:00
April 9	Boston	7:30
April 10	Toronto	7:30
April 12	Charlotte	6:00

*Emirates NBA Cup regular-season game
All times Eastern



PHI 76ERS

ATLANTIC DIVISION PREDICTION: **3RD**

Can Joel Embiid return to his MVP form? That's the biggest question surrounding the Philadelphia 76ers heading into the 2025-26 season. The seven-time All-Star center played in only 19 games last season, primarily due to a left knee ailment. As he noted in July, he doesn't intend to rush back from April's arthroscopic surgery.

In addition, the Sixers intend to be cautious with Paul George, who had arthroscopic surgery on his left knee in July. As a result, there's speculation about whether the nine-time All-Star will be ready at the start of the season.

If the oddsmakers' current over/under projections prove true, the Sixers will be bound for the NBA Play-In Tournament for the second time in three seasons.

But ...

"I do think it's open in the East," Sixers president of basketball operations Daryl Morey told a group of reporters at July's NBA Summer League in Las Vegas. "I think that's a fair characterization."

"We're going to have to prove that we're sort of with those upper-echelon teams in the East. But we do feel like if all things come together, we can be right there, and we've also given ourselves a lot of flexibility to upgrade the team during the year if things are going as well as we hope."

The problem is that their success is heavily dependent on the health of Embiid and George. George averaged 16.2 points per game, the fourth-lowest average of his 15 NBA seasons, after signing a four-year, \$212 million maximum-salary contract last summer to form a Big Three with Embiid and Tyrese Maxey. Meanwhile, Embiid missed the entire preseason and the first six regular-season games while managing a left knee injury. Then he served a three-game suspension before ultimately ending his season in February while struggling to gain full strength in his left knee after undergoing meniscus surgery on Feb. 6.

The Sixers have nearly \$145 million tied up in Embiid (\$55.2 million), George (\$51.7 million), and Maxey (\$37.9 million) this season, which made it impossible to add free agents on the lucrative salaries needed to make an immediate impact. As a result, the Sixers are bringing back the same core group from the team that finished 24-58 a season ago.

FRONT COURT

Unfortunately for the 7-foot, 280-pound Embiid and for the Sixers, last season's averages of 23.8 points and 8.2 rebounds were the fourth- and second-lowest, respectively, in his nine NBA seasons. He also shot career lows from the field (44.4%) and on 3-pointers

SCOUTING THE 76ERS

ANONYMOUS TAKES
FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

"Joel Embiid will probably be battling injuries for the rest of his career. Imagine how good they could be if he actually stayed healthy. ... At this point, they might be better off making Tyrese Maxey the true face of the franchise. ... I'm not sure how much Paul George has left in the tank, and that's a big gamble for a team with this many question marks. ... Nick Nurse is an excellent coach, but given the circumstances, he could still find himself on the hot seat if things go south early. ... I'd give this group until the trade deadline to prove it works. If not, blow it up. They're great on paper, but unfortunately for them, the only paper that matters is the injury report."



TYRESE
MAXEY

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Record: 49-23	Record: 51-31	Record: 54-28	Record: 47-35	Record: 24-58
Division: 1st	Division: 2nd	Division: 2nd	Division: 3rd	Division: 5th



JOEL EMBIID

BEYOND THE ARC

COMMUNITY MAN

Tyrese Maxey is setting himself up to be a community leader in Philadelphia through his Tyrese Maxey Foundation. The sixth-year player hosted a Night of Giving dinner on July 31. The next day, he hosted a celebrity golf tournament before running his Tyrese Maxey 1% Skills Camp on Aug. 2. The foundation also donated \$60,000 that weekend — \$25,000 to the City College of Municipal Employment, \$25,000 to TGR Learning Lab Philadelphia and \$10,000 to the 2025 Tyrese Maxey Scholarship Recipient, Aubrey Smith.

MR. EXPERIENCE

Kyle Lowry, 39, is the third-oldest active player in the NBA behind LeBron James, 40, and Chris Paul, 40. The Sixer also ranks sixth among active players in career games played at 1,173.

INTERNATIONAL FLAVOR

The Sixers have three players born internationally — Joel Embiid, Adem Bona and first-round draft pick VJ Edgecombe. Embiid, a native of Cameroon, became a United States citizen in 2022. Bona was born in Nigeria and moved to Turkey at age 13. Edgecombe is a native of the Bahamas and is a teammate on the Bahamian national team of Eric Gordon, whose mother was born in Nassau.



PAUL GEORGE



Embiid’s presence helped spark Maxey’s breakout season in 2023-24, when he earned an All-Star bid and was named the league’s Most Improved Player.

With Embiid sidelined most of last season, Maxey had to carry the bulk of the Sixers’ load. He averaged career highs of 26.3 points and 21.0 field-goal attempts per game, but he shot a career-low 43.7% and committed a career-high 2.4 turnovers per contest while constantly drawing crowds.

Maxey will likely lean on the oldest members of last season’s squad in Kyle Lowry, 39, and Eric Gordon, 36, after the Sixers re-signed the duo in the offseason. At this stage, their best asset is their mentorship.

Gordon, who has played 17 NBA seasons, will be a great confidante to Edgecombe, his teammate on the Bahamian national team. As a career 37.2% 3-point shooter, Gordon could also provide a deep threat in key situations if needed.

Lowry, who has played 19 NBA seasons, will be an extension of the coaching staff. He’ll continue to help players buy in to what head coach Nick Nurse is selling. Lowry was Nurse’s standout floor leader on the Toronto Raptors’ 2019 NBA championship team. While the six-time All-Star and Olympic gold medalist’s level of play has dropped off, he remains an animated leader and perhaps the most well-respected player in the locker room.

FINAL ANALYSIS

The Sixers did get younger at the center position and added size in the frontcourt with Watford, Walker and Barlow.

But they still need Embiid, George and Maxey to be healthy to contend for a title. So that trio had better remain available. If not, this team could be in trouble.

2025-26 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 22	at Boston	7:30
Oct. 25	Charlotte	7:30
Oct. 27	Orlando	7:00
Oct. 28	at Washington	7:00
Oct. 31	Boston*	7:00

NOVEMBER

Nov. 2	at Brooklyn	6:00
Nov. 4	at Chicago	8:00
Nov. 5	at Cleveland	7:00
Nov. 8	Toronto	7:30
Nov. 9	Detroit	7:30
Nov. 11	Boston	8:00
Nov. 14	at Detroit*	7:30
Nov. 17	L.A. Clippers	7:00
Nov. 19	Toronto	7:00
Nov. 20	at Milwaukee	8:00
Nov. 23	Miami	1:00
Nov. 25	Orlando*	8:00
Nov. 28	at Brooklyn*	7:30
Nov. 30	Atlanta	6:00

DECEMBER

Dec. 2	Washington	7:00
Dec. 4	Golden State	7:00
Dec. 5	at Milwaukee	8:00
Dec. 7	L.A. Lakers	7:30
Dec. 9, 10	Emirates NBA Cup Quarterfinals	
Dec. 13	Emirates NBA Cup Semifinals	
Dec. 16	Emirates NBA Cup Championship	
Dec. 19	at New York	7:00

Dec. 20	Dallas	7:00
Dec. 23	Brooklyn	7:00
Dec. 26	at Chicago	8:00
Dec. 28	at Oklahoma City	3:30
Dec. 30	at Memphis	8:00

JANUARY

Jan. 1	at Dallas	8:30
Jan. 3	at New York	7:30
Jan. 5	Denver	8:30
Jan. 7	Washington	7:00
Jan. 9	at Orlando	7:00
Jan. 11	at Toronto	6:00
Jan. 12	at Toronto	7:30
Jan. 14	Cleveland	7:00
Jan. 16	Cleveland	7:00
Jan. 19	Indiana	7:00
Jan. 20	Phoenix	7:00
Jan. 22	Houston	7:00
Jan. 24	New York	3:00
Jan. 26	at Charlotte	7:00
Jan. 27	Milwaukee	8:00
Jan. 29	Sacramento	7:00
Jan. 31	New Orleans	7:30

FEBRUARY

Feb. 2	at L.A. Clippers	10:30
Feb. 3	at Golden State	10:00
Feb. 5	at L.A. Lakers	10:00
Feb. 7	at Phoenix	9:00
Feb. 9	at Portland	10:00
Feb. 11	New York	7:30
Feb. 19	Atlanta	7:00

Feb. 21	at New Orleans	7:00
Feb. 22	at Minnesota	7:00
Feb. 24	at Indiana	7:00
Feb. 26	Miami	7:00

MARCH

March 1	at Boston	6:00
March 3	San Antonio	8:00
March 4	Utah	7:30
March 7	at Atlanta	7:30
March 9	at Cleveland	7:00
March 10	Memphis	7:00
March 12	at Detroit	7:00
March 14	Brooklyn	1:00
March 15	Portland	6:00
March 17	at Denver	9:00
March 19	at Sacramento	10:00
March 21	at Utah	9:30
March 23	Oklahoma City	7:00
March 25	Chicago	7:00
March 28	at Charlotte	6:00
March 30	at Miami	7:00

APRIL

April 1	at Washington	7:00
April 3	Minnesota	7:00
April 4	Detroit	7:00
April 6	at San Antonio	8:00
April 9	at Houston	8:00
April 10	at Indiana	7:30
April 12	Milwaukee	6:00

*Emirates NBA Cup regular-season game
All times Eastern



TOP RAPTORS

ATLANTIC DIVISION PREDICTION: **4TH**

The Toronto Raptors parted ways with team president Masai Ujiri, who oversaw a sustained playoff run (2013-20), an NBA championship (2019) and a mixed record with transitioning to the next era (2022-25).

After firing Ujiri, will the Raptors take the next step toward replicating his playoff success by correcting his rebuilding mistakes? Or will the team merely prolong its three-year postseason drought?

The answer partly depends on who replaces Ujiri. Do they promote longtime general manager Bobby Webster? Do they sign a respected executive from another team? Do they do something unexpected? (As of press time, the Raptors were weighing their options.)

Regardless, the Raptors' fortunes also hinge on their roster.

Toronto acquired star forward Brandon Ingram from the New Orleans Pelicans before last season's trade deadline, but uncertainty surrounds his return from a left ankle injury that sidelined him last season for 64 games.

The Raptors used the No. 9 overall draft pick on a skilled defender (Collin Murray-Boyles), but will that ability translate immediately? After showing inconsistency with his shot at South Carolina, can Murray-Boyles ensure that the work on his mechanics will yield results?

Toronto remains high on Scottie Barnes and Immanuel Quickley, both for their respective talent and long-term potential. So much so that the Raptors secured long-term extensions last summer with both Barnes (five years, up to \$270 million) and Quickley (five years, \$175 million). Can the duo show the requisite growth?

Raptors head coach Darko Rajaković has proven himself with his extensive international experience, his intensity and his positive reinforcement. But after facing challenges with roster construction and injuries, can Rajaković actually coach the Raptors to more wins?

FRONTCOURT

The Raptors' success mostly depends on Ingram and Barnes. It's unclear if that should leave them feeling encouraged or unsettled.

Through his nine-year NBA career, Ingram has become a versatile player who can thrive as both a mid-range scorer and playmaker with his 6-foot-8, 190-pound frame. Ingram has the skills and fundamentals to finish strong at the rim and even defend wing players. Nonetheless, Ingram's trajectory also elicits concern.

Though the Raptors cleared Ingram this summer for all drills, he has a mixed track record with his durability. He healed well enough from a blood clot during his final season with the Los Angeles

SCOUTING THE RAPTORS

ANONYMOUS TAKES
FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

"I'm not really sure what the plan is here. They're running it back, hoping that Brandon Ingram will be the pickup they needed. ... Scottie Barnes is so tough. But I think he's a No. 2 or even 3 option on a winning team. ... I'd move either RJ Barrett or Immanuel Quickley, or both, at some point. They're only going to get you to a certain level. Barrett should be your fourth option. ... They need Grady Dick to take another leap. He reminds me a little of Gordon Hayward, but not as good yet. ... I'm not sure what to think about the Raptors. I know I'm never really that nervous when we play them. ... It feels like they're spinning their wheels."



BRANDON
INGRAM

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Record: 27-45	Record: 48-34	Record: 41-41	Record: 25-57	Record: 30-52
Division: 5th	Division: 3rd	Division: 5th	Division: 5th	Division: 3rd



SCOTTIE BARNES

BEYOND THE ARC

BIG GOALS Beyond making his second NBA playoff appearance, Scottie Barnes has shared his individual goal. "I'm an All-Defensive Team type of player," Barnes says. "But once those wins come with it, that's how you get in those conversations."

SIGN OF RESPECT Although they haven't played together yet, Brandon Ingram's respect for Barnes increased after observing him at the team's facility. "He stays ready," Ingram says. "Every time that I've been here, he never complains about practice."

EXCITED OR NOT? Once he learned the Raptors had drafted him at No. 9, Collin Murray-Boyles yelled out an expletive and shook his head. TV cameras captured the viral moment, which suggested Murray-Boyles' disappointment. He stresses that he felt exactly the opposite. "What I said was not a bad thing by any means," Murray-Boyles says. "Just very thankful for it. That was a surreal moment to hear my name called and by this organization that has a good history and has really good players."

RESPECT THE LEGENDS Immediately after the Raptors selected him at No. 39, Alijah Martin showed his awareness of the franchise's history. Martin announced that he would not wear No. 15 as he did at Florida out of respect for Vince Carter's accomplished career in Toronto (1998-2004). Instead, Martin will wear No. 55. "Fifteen has a lot of meaning to me, but I'm not trying to take away from Vince's legacy," Martin said. "Obviously, he's a legend. I want him to keep his number retired."

//// **TORONTO RAPTORS** ////

Lakers (2018-19) to excel during his first season in New Orleans and land an All-Star berth (2019-20). Since then, Ingram has missed 157 out of a possible 400 games (39.3%). He played only 18 games last season, and he also missed significant time in 2020-21 (11 games), 2021-22 (27), 2022-23 (37) and 2023-24 (18). When healthy, Ingram showed the Pelicans that he could mesh well with teammates. But they declined to extend him partly because they remained skeptical that he could carry a franchise.

What does that mean for Barnes? He could become the franchise player that the Raptors envision because of his defensive versatility, athleticism and play-making. Barnes has shown inconsistency, however, with his health and outside shooting. He has missed a total of 39 games over the past two seasons, and he shot a career-low 27.1% from 3-point range last season. Ingram and Barnes will pair together just fine, but they are not the most ideal duo because of their overlapping question marks.

Veteran center Jakob Poeltl remains dependable as a consistent rim protector, team defender and rebounder. Murray-Boyles will earn minutes immediately because of his defensive versatility on the wing and inside. Sandro Mamukelashvili will become a serviceable backup center for his stretch-five skills. The Raptors' frontcourt identity, however, centers mostly around Ingram and Barnes.

BACKCOURT

The backcourt rests on two familiar faces: Quickley and RJ Barrett. Quickley averaged career highs last season in points (17.1) and assists (5.8) per game in his first full NBA season as a regular starter. He drastically improved the team's spacing and pace. Barrett grew as a playmaker, has become a steady rebounder and has shown flashes of strong perimeter defense and shooting.

Here's the catch: Quickley played in only 33 games last season amid various injuries, while Barrett hasn't shown whether he can shoot and defend consistently. Perhaps Quickley will experience better fortune with his health. Maybe Barrett will receive more open looks with the attention that Ingram attracts.

////
246

The Raptors have played 246 regular-season games since last appearing in the playoffs (2022), when the team lost to the Philadelphia 76ers in the first round. Toronto has missed the playoffs in four of the past six seasons since winning the 2019 NBA championship.



Collin Murray-Boyles ////

**OFFSEASON
MOVES**

DRAFT PICKS

- 1 COLLIN MURRAY-BOYLES**
F, 6-7, 245, South Carolina
- 2 ALIJAH MARTIN**
G, 6-2, 210, Florida

Murray-Boyles should receive significant backup minutes because of his defensive versatility and strong decision-making. He will likely stay limited offensively because of his inconsistent shooting, but he continues to refine his mechanics. The Raptors love Martin's team-oriented approach, his professionalism and his athleticism. But he will likely face a logjam in front of him.

OTHER NEWCOMERS

Brandon Ingram, a trade deadline acquisition last season, should fit in for his post presence, finishing and playmaking. He will set the right tone among his teammates with his unassuming personality and strong work habits.

ROSTER							2024-25 STATISTICS										48-MINUTE PRODUCTIVITY		
HEAD COACH: DARKO RAJAKOVIĆ (3RD SEASON; CAREER: 55-109)																			
#	PLAYER	POS	HT	WT	DOB	FROM	YRS	G	MPG	FG%	3P%	FT%	RPG	APG	PPG		REB	AST	PTS
3	Brandon Ingram	F	6-8	190	9/02/97	Duke	9	18	33.1	.465	.374	.855	5.6	5.2	22.2		8.1	7.5	32.3
9	RJ Barrett	F/G	6-6	214	6/14/00	Duke	6	58	32.2	.468	.350	.630	6.3	5.4	21.1		9.4	8.1	31.4
4	Scottie Barnes	F/G	6-7	237	8/01/01	Florida State	4	65	32.8	.446	.271	.755	7.7	5.8	19.3		11.3	8.5	28.2
5	Immanuel Quickley	G	6-2	190	6/17/99	Kentucky	5	33	27.8	.420	.378	.867	3.5	5.8	17.1		6.1	10.0	29.5
19	Jakob Poeltl	C	7-0	260	10/15/95	Utah	9	57	29.6	.627	.333	.674	9.6	2.8	14.5		15.6	4.5	23.5
1	Grady Dick	G/F	6-6	200	11/20/03	Kansas	2	54	29.4	.410	.350	.858	3.6	1.8	14.4		5.8	3.0	23.5
30	Ochai Agbaji	G	6-5	215	4/20/00	Kansas	3	64	27.2	.498	.399	.708	3.8	1.5	10.4		6.7	2.7	18.4
0	A.J. Lawson	G	6-6	179	7/15/00	South Carolina	3	26	18.7	.421	.327	.683	3.3	1.2	9.1		8.5	3.1	23.3
14	Ja'Kobe Walter	G	6-5	180	9/04/04	Baylor	1	52	21.2	.405	.349	.795	3.1	1.6	8.6		7.0	3.5	19.5
23	Jamal Sheard	G	6-1	200	7/24/02	Houston	1	75	19.6	.405	.323	.768	1.5	4.2	7.1		3.8	10.3	17.4
77	Jamison Battle	F	6-7	220	5/10/01	Ohio State	1	59	17.7	.429	.405	.889	2.7	0.9	7.1		7.3	2.4	19.3
54	Sandro Mamukelashvili	F/C	6-9	240	5/23/99	Seton Hall	4	61	11.2	.502	.373	.741	3.1	0.8	6.3		13.2	3.4	27.1
2	Jonathan Mogbo	F	6-9	225	10/29/01	San Francisco	1	63	20.4	.438	.243	.732	4.9	2.3	6.2		11.6	5.5	14.5
45	David Roddy	F	6-4	255	3/27/01	Colorado State	3	33	12.4	.456	.311	.769	2.5	1.1	4.6		9.8	4.1	17.9
17	Garrett Temple	G/F	6-5	195	5/08/86	LSU	15	28	8.1	.300	.214	.917	1.0	1.1	1.9		6.1	6.6	11.2
22	Ulrich Chomche	C	6-11	235	12/30/05	NBA Global Academy	1	7	4.6	.400	.000	.500	1.1	0.3	0.7		11.9	3.0	7.5
30	Olivier Sarr	C	6-10	240	2/20/99	Kentucky	3	Injured — Missed Season											
12	Collin Murray-Boyles	F	6-7	245	6/10/05	South Carolina		R — First NBA Season											
	Chucky Hepburn	G	6-2	190	2/09/03	Louisville		R — First NBA Season											
55	Alijah Martin	G	6-2	210	12/26/01	Florida		R — First NBA Season											

JEFF BLAKE-IMAGN IMAGES



RJ BARRETT

It also seems possible that last season’s scenario plays out again — Quickley dazzles but shows limited availability, while Barrett remains solid but not good enough to make a dramatic difference.

The team’s bench rotation can’t plug those potential holes. Second-year guard Jamal Shead has two-way potential, but he still needs more time to blossom. Third-year guard Gradey Dick can make 3-pointers and plays hard, but he lacks defensive consistency. Veteran guard Garrett Temple gives respectable effort, but he has never been a difference-maker.

FINAL ANALYSIS

While watching the Raptors’ Summer League team, Ingram boldly predicted that the Raptors would make the playoffs this season. Don’t bet on it.

The on-court fit among Ingram, Quickley, Barnes and Barrett could work. They will need significant time to iron out how they divvy up the scoring and playmaking while ensuring the proper spacing for each other.

The Raptors likely lack that luxury, though. Ingram and Quickley have such an extensive injury history that it seems fair to wonder if one or both will experience availability issues. The core players have amenable personalities, but they may also struggle with being deferential rather than aggressive.

Whenever the Raptors finalize their front office, they will need to find ways to upgrade their roster. It appears unlikely that they could make any significant moves leading into the trade deadline, though.

The Raptors most likely have to develop from within. They also can’t suffer any major injuries. Is that enough to improve last season’s 30-52 record and 11th-place standing in the Eastern Conference? Possible. Is that enough to make the playoffs? Perhaps as a Play-In Tournament candidate. Is that enough to make a deep postseason push? No way.

2025-26 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 22	at Atlanta	7:30
Oct. 24	Milwaukee	7:30
Oct. 26	at Dallas	7:30
Oct. 27	at San Antonio	8:00
Oct. 29	Houston	7:30
Oct. 31	at Cleveland*	7:30

NOVEMBER

Nov. 2	Memphis	6:00
Nov. 4	Milwaukee	7:30
Nov. 7	at Atlanta*	7:30
Nov. 8	at Philadelphia	7:30
Nov. 11	at Brooklyn	7:30
Nov. 13	at Cleveland	7:00
Nov. 15	at Indiana	7:00
Nov. 17	Charlotte	7:30
Nov. 19	at Philadelphia	7:00
Nov. 21	Washington*	7:30
Nov. 23	Brooklyn	6:00
Nov. 24	Cleveland	7:00
Nov. 26	Indiana*	7:30
Nov. 29	at Charlotte	6:00
Nov. 30	at New York	6:00

DECEMBER

Dec. 2	Portland	7:30
Dec. 4	L.A. Lakers	7:30
Dec. 5	Charlotte	7:30
Dec. 7	Boston	3:30
Dec. 9, 10	Emirates NBA Cup Quarterfinals	
Dec. 13	Emirates NBA Cup Semifinals	
Dec. 16	Emirates NBA Cup Championship	

Dec. 18	at Milwaukee	8:00
Dec. 20	Boston	7:00
Dec. 21	at Brooklyn	6:00
Dec. 23	at Miami	7:30
Dec. 26	at Washington	7:00
Dec. 28	Golden State	3:30
Dec. 29	Orlando	7:30
Dec. 31	Denver	7:30

JANUARY

Jan. 3	Atlanta	7:30
Jan. 5	Atlanta	7:30
Jan. 7	at Charlotte	7:00
Jan. 9	at Boston	7:00
Jan. 11	Philadelphia	6:00
Jan. 12	Philadelphia	7:30
Jan. 14	at Indiana	7:00
Jan. 16	L.A. Clippers	7:30
Jan. 18	at L.A. Lakers	9:30
Jan. 20	at Golden State	10:00
Jan. 21	at Sacramento	10:00
Jan. 23	at Portland	10:00
Jan. 25	at Oklahoma City	7:00
Jan. 28	New York	7:30
Jan. 30	at Orlando	7:00

FEBRUARY

Feb. 1	Utah	6:00
Feb. 4	Minnesota	7:30
Feb. 5	Chicago	7:30
Feb. 8	Indiana	3:00
Feb. 11	Detroit	7:30

Feb. 19	at Chicago	8:00
Feb. 22	at Milwaukee	3:30
Feb. 24	Oklahoma City	7:30
Feb. 25	San Antonio	7:30
Feb. 28	at Washington	7:00

MARCH

March 3	New York	7:30
March 5	at Minnesota	8:00
March 8	Dallas	6:00
March 10	at Houston	8:00
March 11	at New Orleans	8:00
March 13	Phoenix	7:30
March 15	Detroit	3:30
March 18	at Chicago	8:00
March 20	at Denver	9:00
March 22	at Phoenix	9:00
March 23	at Utah	9:00
March 25	at L.A. Clippers	10:30
March 27	New Orleans	8:30
March 29	Orlando	6:00
March 31	at Detroit	8:00

APRIL

April 1	Sacramento	8:00
April 3	at Memphis	8:00
April 5	at Boston	3:30
April 7	Miami	7:30
April 9	Miami	7:00
April 10	at New York	7:30
April 12	Brooklyn	6:00

**Emirates NBA Cup regular-season game
All times Eastern*



FRONT COURT BULLS

CENTRAL DIVISION PREDICTION: 5TH

The moment that Indiana Pacers guard Tyrese Haliburton crumbled to the ground in Game 7 of the NBA Finals, notice was served to the Eastern Conference that it was the perfect time for franchises to step up and be aggressive in the offseason. Especially since weeks earlier, like Haliburton, the Boston Celtics' Jayson Tatum also went down with a ruptured Achilles tendon that will cost him the 2025-26 campaign.

A vacancy atop the conference that was screaming to be filled? The Chicago Bulls, well, they didn't get that memo.

"We need to remain diligent and pragmatic about how we build this," general manager Marc Eversley says of the immediate direction of the organization. "We don't want to skip steps. I think sometimes when you do skip steps, expectations kind of build, and you make mistakes."

The Bulls made sure that wasn't an issue, continuing to take the slow-play approach of building depth to fit their new style of play while also trying to balance the roster out with a mix of youth and veterans.

That's why they pulled the trigger on a Lonzo Ball-for-Isaac Okoro trade in the offseason. Yes, Ball is a more productive player when he's healthy, but he's also three years older and has been less available. But even with moves like that, the Bulls remain very much an unfinished product.

Executive vice president of basketball operations Artūras Karnišovas aggressively tried moving veteran Nikola Vučević the past two years and will continue to do so in this, the final year of his contract. Guard Coby White turned down the discount extension to stay a Bull, instead betting on himself and looking for a much bigger payday as an unrestricted free agent next summer. And meanwhile, Karnišovas and Eversley have been patting themselves on the back with all the salary cap freedom they will have next summer. Besides Vučević and White, Zach Collins, Kevin Huerter, Ayo Dosunmu and Jevon Carter all come off the books.

But what exactly is the end game?

That's still the biggest unanswered question with this regime. The Bulls can't get out of the Play-In Tournament, refuse to tank to try and hit lottery gold and still can't answer how they're supposed to land an elite player. Instead, they want the fan base to trust that they will figure it out.

FRONTCOURT

While the front office won't say it, as goes the maturation of Matas Buzelis this season, so go the Bulls. Not only did the rookie take the starting job away from Patrick Williams midway through last season,

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Record: 31-41	Record: 46-36	Record: 40-42	Record: 39-43	Record: 39-43
Division: 3rd	Division: 2nd	Division: 3rd	Division: 4th	Division: 5th

SCOUTING THE BULLS

ANONYMOUS TAKES
FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

"Josh Giddey, Coby White and Nikola Vučević are the core now, and that's not bad, but it's also not striking fear in the East's top teams. ... Giddey was unsigned deep into the offseason, and you wonder if that messes with his confidence or focus early on. ... White continues to improve and gives them a go-to scoring option, but he still has stretches where he disappears. ... Vučević remains steady in the middle, though he needs more help on the boards. ... Isaac Okoro brings much-needed defensive versatility. ... Billy Donovan's teams tend to play disciplined, competitive basketball, but without another true star, this group feels more like a middle-of-the-pack team."



COBY WHITE

FROM LEFT: NELL REDMOND-IMAGN IMAGES; BILL STREICHER-IMAGN IMAGES



JOSH GIDDEY

BEYOND THE ARC

OLD SCHOOL Second-year forward Matas Buzelis, a Chicago native, doesn't understand why so much has been made about his becoming a primary ball-handler. "I was a point guard when I was younger, so me getting back to my roots, I always had the ball in my hands. It's like second nature," Buzelis said.

PINSTripES The team announced that the 2025-26 Statement Edition jersey will be a throwback to the Michael Jordan era — black with the red pinstripes. Jordan's Bulls first debuted the look during the 1995-96 season, when they held up the Larry O'Brien Championship Trophy after winning 72 regular-season games. The look stayed around for the 1996-97 season and came back for the 2007-08 and 2012-13 seasons but hadn't been worn since.

SHEDDING DOLLARS The hope for the Bulls is that they can become players in the 2026 market — free agents or sign-and-trades — with the roster likely shedding at least \$72.5 million by the end of the upcoming campaign. Nikola Vučević, Zach Collins, Kevin Huertner, Ayo Dosunmu and Jevon Carter all come off the books for sure.

WORK BOOTS Vučević watched his 3-point percentage improve from a disappointing 29.4% in the 2023-24 season to 40.2% last year. According to Vučević, it came down to "just having more confidence and finding that again."

CHICAGO BULLS

but there's also a feeling around the organization that Buzelis could become the face of the franchise. He added weight and muscle over the summer, has been given more ball-handling responsibility in the offense and is poised for a breakout season.

Meanwhile, the Bulls will continue to shop Williams, as the stock for the former No. 4 overall draft pick continues to fall. That's why Okoro was such an important get. Williams was supposed to develop into a stopper on the wing but has been far too passive.

The hope is that Okoro will fill that role while pushing Williams. That was also the thought behind the drafting of 18-year-old project Noa Essengue. The youngster will need a lot of work to get his game ready for the NBA, but the hope is that his upside will eventually allow him to replace Williams.

Vučević will remain the starting center as long as he's a Bull, while Collins and Jalen Smith will share backup minutes.

The rest of the frontcourt rotation will come down to Dalen Terry and Julian Phillips fighting for minutes. Both were in and out of head coach Billy Donovan's rotation last season, and that will continue for both until one shows that he can step forward.

BACKCOURT

The Bulls played hardball with restricted free agent Josh Giddey, who started off the 2024-25 campaign wanting a Jalen Suggs-like contract extension that would pay him \$30 million per year. While his long-term value was debatable, the spark he provided to Donovan's new up-tempo style of play was not.

The Bulls went from 28th in pace of play (96.94) in the 2023-24 season to second (103.61) last year, and Giddey was a big reason why with his ability to use his positional size to rebound the basketball and get the team up the floor.

It was a unique season for Giddey in Year 1 with the Bulls. He went from a starter who wasn't even

42

The Bulls averaged 42 3-point attempts per game last season, finishing third behind only the Boston Celtics and Golden State Warriors. The year before, they averaged 32.1 attempts from beyond the arc (fifth-fewest in the league) and were dead last (28.9 attempts per game) in the 2022-23 season. It's a complete change of philosophy for head coach Billy Donovan and the offense.



Noa Essengue

OFFSEASON MOVES

DRAFT PICKS

1 NOA ESSENGUE

PF, 6-10, 200, Ratiopharm Ulm (German League)

2 LACHLAN OLBRICH

PF/C, 6-10, 236, Illawarra Hawks (Australian League)

The Bulls like Essengue's athleticism and ability to cut and attack the rim — two keys to what they want from their bigger wings. Olbrich comes with a certain amount of physicality and is expected to see a lot of action with the G-League Windy City Bulls. Both players are projects.

OTHER NEWCOMERS

The big move on the trade front was sending Lonzo Ball to the Cleveland Cavaliers for Isaac Okoro. The hope is that Okoro will have a chip on his shoulder and want to prove the doubters wrong. He will have that opportunity with the Bulls.

ROSTER							2024-25 STATISTICS										48-MINUTE PRODUCTIVITY		
HEAD COACH: BILLY DONOVAN (6TH SEASON; CAREER: 438-362)																			
#	PLAYER	POS	HT	WT	DOB	FROM	YRS	G	MPG	FG%	3P%	FT%	RPG	APG	PPG		REB	AST	PTS
0	Coby White	G	6-5	195	2/16/00	North Carolina	6	74	33.1	.453	.370	.902	3.7	4.5	20.4		5.3	6.5	29.6
9	Nikola Vučević	C	6-10	260	10/24/90	USC	14	73	31.2	.530	.402	.805	10.1	3.5	18.5		15.5	5.4	28.4
3	Josh Giddey	G	6-8	216	10/10/02	NBA Global Academy	4	70	30.2	.465	.378	.781	8.1	7.2	14.6		12.8	11.4	23.2
11	Ayo Dosunmu	G	6-5	200	1/17/00	Illinois	4	46	30.3	.492	.328	.785	3.5	4.5	12.3		5.5	7.2	19.5
13	Kevin Huerter	G/F	6-7	198	8/27/98	Maryland	7	69	24.3	.425	.338	.714	3.0	2.3	9.9		5.9	4.5	19.5
44	Patrick Williams	F	6-7	215	8/26/01	Florida State	5	63	25.0	.397	.353	.723	3.8	2.0	9.0		7.2	3.8	17.2
14	Matas Buzelis	F	6-10	209	10/13/04	G League Ignite	1	80	18.9	.454	.361	.815	3.5	1.0	8.6		8.8	2.5	21.9
25	Jalen Smith	F/C	6-9	215	3/16/00	Maryland	5	64	15.0	.466	.324	.809	5.6	1.0	8.2		17.8	3.2	26.1
30	Tre Jones	G	6-1	185	1/08/00	Duke	5	46	19.7	.538	.396	.821	2.5	4.2	7.2		6.2	10.2	17.5
12	Zach Collins	F/C	6-11	250	11/19/97	Gonzaga	7	64	15.3	.507	.302	.885	4.5	1.7	6.4		14.1	5.5	20.0
35	Isaac Okoro	F/G	6-5	225	1/26/01	Auburn	5	55	19.1	.464	.371	.717	2.4	1.2	6.1		5.9	3.1	15.4
15	Julian Phillips	F	6-8	198	11/05/03	Tennessee	2	79	14.2	.446	.327	.789	2.1	0.5	4.6		7.2	1.7	15.6
7	Dalen Terry	F	6-7	195	7/12/02	Arizona	3	73	13.5	.448	.356	.710	1.7	1.3	4.5		6.0	4.7	15.9
5	Jevon Carter	G	6-1	200	9/14/95	West Virginia	7	36	8.9	.377	.333	.800	1.1	1.1	4.3		5.8	6.0	22.9
20	Emanuel Miller	F	6-7	215	6/19/00	TCU	1	6	4.1	.500	.000	1.000	1.3	0.3	1.7		15.5	3.9	19.4
17	Yuki Kawamura	G	5-8	159	5/02/01	Yokohama B-Corsairs	1	22	4.2	.367	.304	.778	0.5	0.9	1.6		6.2	9.8	18.6
24	Noa Essengue	F	6-10	200	12/18/06	Ratiopharm Ulm													
	Caleb Grill	G	6-3	205	6/15/00	Missouri													
47	Lachlan Olbrich	C	6-10	236	12/30/03	Illawarra													
	Wooga Poplar	F	6-5	197	1/05/03	Miami (Fla.)													



MATAS BUZELIS

finishing games in November because of his shaky defense to a player who averaged 21.2 points, 10.7 rebounds and 9.3 assists per game after the All-Star break while shooting a ridiculous 45.7% from long range and playing better defense.

White and Dosunmu also benefited from the change of style, as they were freed up to get out on the break and score. Both guards set career highs in points per game.

The final piece for Donovan’s backcourt rotation was veteran Tre Jones, whom the Bulls acquired in the Zach LaVine three-team deal prior to last season’s deadline. Jones proved to be the calming force on the floor, and his high IQ was a big reason why the Bulls re-signed him in free agency and moved off Ball.

With Huerter’s ability to stretch the floor — getting time as a starter and reserve — the only concern from Donovan with this unit was their ability to be more consistent defensively.

FINAL ANALYSIS

The Bulls front office loves to remind everyone that they are not a finished product, and there are “iterations” to this rebuild/reload, but the problems facing this roster have been mostly self-inflicted by Karnišovas and Eversley.

Even with a 2026 draft class that is shaping up to be loaded, the goal is to remain as competitive as possible and focus on development from within. That’s why Buzelis’ upcoming season is almost everything for the organization since he may have the highest ceiling of any player on the roster.

It’s one thing to talk about moving away from mediocrity year after year, but as this front office continues to display, talking about it is all they’ve been able to do.

2025-26 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 22	Detroit	8:00
Oct. 25	at Orlando	7:00
Oct. 27	Atlanta	8:00
Oct. 29	Sacramento	8:00
Oct. 31	New York*	8:00

NOVEMBER

Nov. 2	at New York	7:00
Nov. 4	Philadelphia	8:00
Nov. 7	at Milwaukee*	8:00
Nov. 8	at Cleveland	8:00
Nov. 10	San Antonio	8:00
Nov. 12	at Detroit	7:00
Nov. 16	at Utah	8:00
Nov. 17	at Denver	9:00
Nov. 19	at Portland	10:00
Nov. 21	Miami*	8:00
Nov. 22	Washington	8:00
Nov. 24	at New Orleans	8:00
Nov. 28	at Charlotte*	7:30
Nov. 29	at Indiana	7:30

DECEMBER

Dec. 1	at Orlando	7:30
Dec. 3	Brooklyn	8:00
Dec. 5	Indiana	8:00
Dec. 7	Golden State	7:00
Dec. 9, 10	Emirates NBA Cup Quarterfinals	
Dec. 13	Emirates NBA Cup Semifinals	
Dec. 16	Emirates NBA Cup Championship	
Dec. 17	Cleveland	8:00
Dec. 19	at Cleveland	7:30

Dec. 21	at Atlanta	3:30
Dec. 23	at Atlanta	7:30
Dec. 26	Philadelphia	8:00
Dec. 27	Milwaukee	8:00
Dec. 29	Minnesota	8:00
Dec. 31	New Orleans	7:00

JANUARY

Jan. 2	Orlando	8:00
Jan. 3	Charlotte	8:00
Jan. 5	at Boston	7:30
Jan. 7	at Detroit	7:00
Jan. 8	Miami	8:00
Jan. 10	Dallas	8:00
Jan. 13	at Houston	8:00
Jan. 14	Utah	8:00
Jan. 16	at Brooklyn	7:00
Jan. 18	Brooklyn	7:00
Jan. 20	L.A. Clippers	8:00
Jan. 22	at Minnesota	8:00
Jan. 24	Boston	8:00
Jan. 26	L.A. Lakers	8:00
Jan. 28	at Indiana	7:00
Jan. 30	at Miami	8:00

FEBRUARY

Feb. 1	at Miami	6:00
Feb. 3	at Milwaukee	8:00
Feb. 5	at Toronto	7:30
Feb. 7	Denver	8:00
Feb. 9	at Brooklyn	7:30
Feb. 11	at Boston	7:30
Feb. 19	Toronto	8:00

Feb. 21	Detroit	8:00
Feb. 22	New York	8:00
Feb. 24	Charlotte	8:00
Feb. 26	Portland	8:00

MARCH

March 1	Milwaukee	3:30
March 3	Oklahoma City	8:00
March 5	at Phoenix	9:00
March 8	at Sacramento	9:00
March 10	at Golden State	10:00
March 12	at L.A. Lakers	10:30
March 13	at L.A. Clippers	10:30
March 16	Memphis	8:00
March 18	Toronto	8:00
March 19	Cleveland	8:00
March 23	Houston	8:00
March 25	at Philadelphia	7:00
March 27	at Oklahoma City	8:00
March 28	at Memphis	8:00
March 30	at San Antonio	8:00

APRIL

April 1	Indiana	8:00
April 3	at New York	7:30
April 5	Phoenix	3:30
April 7	at Washington	7:00
April 9	at Washington	7:00
April 10	Orlando	8:00
April 12	at Dallas	8:30

**Emirates NBA Cup regular-season game
All times Eastern*



CLIFF CAVALIERS

CENTRAL DIVISION PREDICTION: **1ST**

Not since LeBron James' final run in Cleveland has a Cavaliers team entered a season with more reason to believe that this could be the year. The franchise has stacked talent, continuity and a sense of urgency that has been years in the making.

Cleveland's 64-win season under first-year head coach Kenny Atkinson was proof that the core could play with anyone over an 82-game stretch. The Cavs opened 15-0; Donovan Mitchell was a first-team All-NBA performer; Evan Mobley earned Defensive Player of the Year and second-team All-NBA honors; and the starting five stayed intact and engaged.

The regular season belonged to them. But the postseason did not. The Indiana Pacers sent the Cavaliers home in the second round, prolonging a drought that grows more frustrating with each spring.

The front office's response was not to overhaul, but to adjust. The Core Four — Mitchell, Darius Garland, Mobley, Jarrett Allen — returns. Max Strus remains a trusted starter and floor spacer, although De'Andre Hunter is a candidate to take his job and shift Strus into a high-volume bench role. Sam Merrill remains as a shooting specialist.

The biggest change came via the Isaac Okoro trade to Chicago for Lonzo Ball, who still has plenty to prove after knee and wrist issues limited him to 35 total games over the past three seasons. Larry Nance Jr. is also back in town, adding depth and a familiar voice.

This group has won big. Now it must win last.

FRONTCOURT

Cleveland's identity starts up front with Mobley and Allen. Mobley has become the league's premier defensive anchor, able to switch across multiple positions, erase mistakes and dominate on the glass. His next step is expanding his offensive impact, particularly in the half court when playoff defenses slow the game. Allen remains a high-level rim protector and vertical spacer, thriving in pick-and-rolls with Garland and capable of controlling the paint on both ends. Together, Mobley and Allen form one of the most disciplined and dependable frontcourt tandems in the NBA.

Depth was an issue last season, forcing Atkinson to stagger Mobley and Allen more than he wanted. Nance can help solve that. He brings versatility, the ability to defend in space and enough shooting to keep the offense flowing. Dean Wade is a stretch option who can play either forward spot, though his role could fluctuate. Nae'Qwan Tomlin's athleticism and defensive energy flashed in the Summer

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Record: 22-50	Record: 44-38	Record: 51-31	Record: 48-34	Record: 64-18
Division: 4th	Division: 3rd	Division: 2nd	Division: 2nd	Division: 1st

SCOUTING THE CAVS

ANONYMOUS TAKES FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

"I like that they decided to run it back. ... This core has earned another shot under Kenny Atkinson. ... Lonzo Ball is a better fit than Ty Jerome if he can stay healthy. He gives them a bigger, more physical guard who can start while Darius Garland recovers or just takes a night off. ... Donovan Mitchell scored less last year, but I'd still call it one of his best seasons. ... Getting the ball in Evan Mobley's hands a little more and relying a little less on Mitchell and Garland wouldn't hurt. ... I'd think about starting De'Andre Hunter over Max Strus. That extra size on the wing could help with a smaller backcourt. ... They still need a reliable backup center for Jarrett Allen."



DARIUS GARLAND

FROM LEFT: GARY A. VASQUEZ-IMAGN IMAGES; KEN BLAZE-IMAGN IMAGES



BEYOND THE ARC

RUNNING IT BACK The Cavaliers are one of the few true contenders returning their entire starting core. Donovan Mitchell, Darius Garland, Evan Mobley and Jarrett Allen have now played three full seasons together. That continuity is rare in today's NBA and a clear advantage in the Eastern Conference.

HUNTER VS. STRUS Max Strus has been a fixture at small forward since arriving in Cleveland. De'Andre Hunter was acquired at last season's trade deadline to make him work for it. Hunter's size and defense offer a different look, while Strus remains the more dangerous shooter. Training camp could set the tone for how head coach Kenny Atkinson balances those skills.

LONZO'S NEW CHAPTER Lonzo Ball has not played more than 35 games in a season since 2021-22. The Cavs are betting he can stay healthy enough to provide secondary play-making, size and defense from the guard spot. His ability to fit with both Mitchell and Garland could swing Cleveland's depth chart.

MOBLEY'S NEXT STEP Mobley has already become the NBA's Defensive Player of the Year. The focus now is on his offensive game — adding range, quicker decisions from the high post and more aggressive finishes. If he takes even a small leap on that end, the Cavs' half-court offense could change dramatically.



DONOVAN MITCHELL

//// CLEVELAND CAVALIERS ///

League, but the second-year forward still has to prove he can hold his own against NBA rotation players.

At small forward, Strus provides elite floor spacing, toughness and a quick trigger from deep. Hunter offers more size and defensive versatility, especially against bigger wings. Atkinson will need to determine early whether Hunter’s defense outweighs the value of Strus’ shooting in the starting unit. The decision could shape how balanced the rotation is between scoring punch and defensive length.

The Cavs know that the top of the frontcourt can compete with anyone. The unanswered question is whether the reserves can sustain that level when the minutes matter most.

BACKCOURT

Mitchell sets the tone. Last season was his most complete year, combining elite scoring with consistent defense and leadership. His ability to create in isolation, push in transition and score at all three levels makes him the focal point of every opponent’s game plan. He thrives on that challenge.

Garland’s blend of quickness, vision and shooting makes him an ideal partner, but his season was cut short by a toe injury that impacted his playoff performance. Offseason surgery could delay his return to full speed. If healthy, Garland’s presence balances the offense, allowing Mitchell to play off the ball more and forcing defenses to pick their poison.

The addition of Ball brings intrigue. At his best, he is a high-IQ playmaker who can control tempo, defend multiple guard spots and ignite the fast break with pinpoint passes. Health is the variable. If he can give Cleveland consistent minutes, he provides a dimension the backcourt has lacked — size and vision without sacrificing defensive pressure.

Merrill offers instant shooting and is never shy about pulling the trigger. Craig Porter Jr. gives Atkinson a change-of-pace option with his activity and rebounding from the guard spot. Rookie

////
121.9

The Cavaliers averaged 121.9 points per game last season, best in the NBA. Their offensive rating of 121.7 also led the league. The Cavs’ elite scoring ability sets the foundation for success, but as we learned last season, maintaining balance with defense and physical play will be crucial in their quest for a deeper playoff run.



Lonzo Ball ////

OFFSEASON
MOVES

DRAFT PICKS

2 TYRESE PROCTOR

G, 6-6, 185, Duke

2 SALIOU NIANG

G, 6-5, 190, Aquila Basket Trento (Italy)

Proctor was selected at No. 49 overall and arrives as a promising young guard with size and play-making ability. He impressed in Summer League and earned a partially guaranteed three-year deal. Niang is a draft-and-stash who will play in the Italian EuroLeague this season.

OTHER NEWCOMERS

Lonzo Ball and Larry Nance Jr. bring veteran presence and versatility. Ball, acquired for Isaac Okoro, offers size, elite court vision and perimeter defense when healthy. Nance returns to Cleveland as a seasoned forward who can defend multiple positions and stretch the floor, giving the frontcourt more depth.

ROSTER							2024-25 STATISTICS										48-MINUTE PRODUCTIVITY		
HEAD COACH: KENNY ATKINSON (2ND SEASON; CAREER: 182-208)																			
#	PLAYER	POS	HT	WT	DOB	FROM	YRS	G	MPG	FG%	3P%	FT%	RPG	APG	PPG		REB	AST	PTS
45	Donovan Mitchell	G	6-3	215	9/07/96	Louisville	8	71	31.4	.443	.368	.823	4.5	5.0	24.0		6.9	7.6	36.6
10	Darius Garland	G	6-1	192	1/26/00	Vanderbilt	6	75	30.7	.472	.401	.878	2.9	6.7	20.6		4.5	10.6	32.2
4	Evan Mobley	C	6-11	215	6/18/01	USC	4	71	30.5	.557	.370	.725	9.3	3.2	18.5		14.6	5.0	29.2
12	De’Andre Hunter	F/G	6-8	221	12/02/97	Virginia	6	64	27.2	.470	.405	.846	4.0	1.4	17.0		7.1	2.5	30.0
31	Jarrett Allen	C	6-9	243	4/21/98	Texas	8	82	28.0	.706	.000	.718	9.7	1.9	13.5		16.7	3.3	23.1
1	Max Strus	G/F	6-5	215	3/28/96	DePaul	6	50	25.5	.442	.386	.824	4.3	3.2	9.4		8.2	6.0	17.8
22	Larry Nance Jr.	F/C	6-8	245	1/01/93	Wyoming	10	24	19.3	.516	.447	.692	4.3	1.6	8.5		10.7	3.9	21.0
2	Lonzo Ball	G	6-6	190	10/27/97	UCLA	6	35	22.2	.366	.344	.815	3.4	3.3	7.6		7.3	7.1	16.5
5	Sam Merrill	G	6-4	205	5/15/96	Utah State	5	71	19.7	.406	.372	.966	2.2	1.5	7.2		5.4	3.7	17.4
30	Nae’Qwan Tomlin	F	6-10	210	12/19/00	Memphis	1	5	12.7	.406	.200	.727	4.2	0.4	7.2		15.9	1.5	27.3
18	Chuma Okeke	F	6-7	229	8/18/98	Auburn	5	9	21.9	.500	.393	.667	5.2	1.7	5.9		11.5	3.7	12.9
32	Dean Wade	F/C	6-9	228	11/20/96	Kansas State	6	59	21.2	.413	.360	.533	4.2	1.3	5.4		9.5	2.9	12.3
9	Craig Porter Jr.	G	6-1	180	2/26/00	Wichita State	2	51	10.1	.514	.438	.719	1.3	1.4	3.7		6.3	6.6	17.6
20	Jaylon Tyson	G/F	6-6	215	12/02/02	California	1	47	9.6	.430	.345	.792	2.0	0.9	3.6		10.2	4.7	17.7
33	Luke Travers	F	6-7	207	9/03/01	Rockingham Flames	1	12	7.3	.250	.000	1.000	1.7	0.7	1.0		10.9	4.4	6.6
77	Saliou Niang	G	6-5	190	5/14/04	Trento													
24	Tyrese Proctor	G	6-6	185	4/01/04	Duke													
										R — First NBA Season									
										R — First NBA Season									

PATRICK GORSKI-IMAGN IMAGES



EVAN MOBLEY

Tyrese Proctor, a smart, poised combo guard, impressed enough to earn a partially guaranteed three-year deal, suggesting that the Cavs see long-term value in his game.

One wild card is Jaylon Tyson, who might not be a household name but has a real shot at earning consistent rotation minutes. The second-year wing is physical, defends with intensity and could take many of Okoro’s former minutes. If he develops a consistent jumper, he could become a two-way piece who earns Atkinson’s trust in high-leverage moments. The Cavs believe he can hit enough shots to keep the floor spaced.

Mitchell’s scoring will always be the headline, but the Cavs’ guard rotation will reach its ceiling only if Garland stays healthy, Ball finds his legs and at least one reserve gives them unexpected playoff production.

FINAL ANALYSIS

The Cavaliers are not searching for their identity. They know who they are and what works. They have one of the league’s most cohesive cores, anchored by two elite bigs, a superstar guard and a point guard who perfectly complements them. They have wings who can defend, shoot and fit into multiple lineup combinations. They have a coach who has proved he can push the right buttons in the regular season. What they do not have is postseason validation.

The quest for that validation will drive the Cavaliers every night. The Eastern Conference remains top-heavy, but Cleveland’s talent and chemistry give the Cavs as much of a chance as anyone to reach the conference finals for the first time in the post-LeBron era.

The formula is there. Execution in May and June will determine if belief turns into something lasting.

2025-26 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 22	at New York	6:00
Oct. 24	at Brooklyn	7:30
Oct. 26	Milwaukee	6:00
Oct. 27	at Detroit	7:00
Oct. 29	at Boston	7:00
Oct. 31	Toronto*	7:30

NOVEMBER

Nov. 2	Atlanta	6:00
Nov. 5	Philadelphia	7:00
Nov. 7	at Washington*	7:00
Nov. 8	Chicago	8:00
Nov. 10	at Miami	7:30
Nov. 12	at Miami	7:30
Nov. 13	Toronto	7:00
Nov. 15	Memphis	5:00
Nov. 17	Milwaukee	7:00
Nov. 19	Houston	7:00
Nov. 21	Indiana*	7:00
Nov. 23	L.A. Clippers	6:00
Nov. 24	at Toronto	7:00
Nov. 28	at Atlanta*	7:30
Nov. 30	Boston	6:00

DECEMBER

Dec. 1	at Indiana	7:00
Dec. 3	Portland	7:00
Dec. 5	San Antonio	7:30
Dec. 6	Golden State	7:30
Dec. 9, 10	Emirates NBA Cup Quarterfinals	
Dec. 13	Emirates NBA Cup Semifinals	
Dec. 16	Emirates NBA Cup Championship	

Dec. 17	at Chicago	8:00
Dec. 19	Chicago	7:30
Dec. 22	Charlotte	7:00
Dec. 23	New Orleans	7:30
Dec. 25	at New York	12:00
Dec. 27	at Houston	8:00
Dec. 29	at San Antonio	8:00
Dec. 31	Phoenix	3:30

JANUARY

Jan. 2	Denver	7:30
Jan. 4	Detroit	2:00
Jan. 6	at Indiana	7:00
Jan. 8	at Minnesota	8:00
Jan. 10	Minnesota	1:00
Jan. 12	Utah	7:00
Jan. 14	at Philadelphia	7:00
Jan. 16	at Philadelphia	7:00
Jan. 19	Oklahoma City	2:30
Jan. 21	at Charlotte	7:00
Jan. 23	Sacramento	7:30
Jan. 24	at Orlando	7:00
Jan. 26	Orlando	7:00
Jan. 28	L.A. Lakers	7:00
Jan. 30	at Phoenix	9:00

FEBRUARY

Feb. 1	at Portland	9:00
Feb. 4	at L.A. Clippers	10:30
Feb. 7	at Sacramento	10:00
Feb. 9	at Denver	9:00
Feb. 11	Washington	7:00
Feb. 19	Brooklyn	7:00

Feb. 20	at Charlotte	7:00
Feb. 22	at Oklahoma City	1:00
Feb. 24	New York	8:00
Feb. 25	at Milwaukee	8:00
Feb. 27	at Detroit	7:00

MARCH

March 1	at Brooklyn	3:30
March 3	Detroit	7:00
March 8	Boston	1:00
March 9	Philadelphia	7:00
March 11	at Orlando	7:30
March 13	at Dallas	8:30
March 15	Dallas	3:30
March 17	at Milwaukee	8:00
March 19	at Chicago	8:00
March 21	at New Orleans	7:00
March 24	Orlando	8:00
March 25	Miami	7:30
March 27	Miami	7:30
March 30	at Utah	9:00
March 31	at L.A. Lakers	10:30

APRIL

April 2	at Golden State	10:00
April 5	Indiana	6:00
April 6	at Memphis	8:00
April 8	Atlanta	7:00
April 10	at Atlanta	7:30
April 12	Washington	6:00

**Emirates NBA Cup regular-season game
All times Eastern*



DET PISTONS

CENTRAL DIVISION PREDICTION: 2ND

One season after suffering a 28-game losing streak, the Pistons stunned the league by finishing 44-38 and claiming the sixth seed in the Eastern Conference. They pushed the New York Knicks in the first round before bowing out, gaining a crash course in playoff basketball. For a young team led by first-year head coach J.B. Bickerstaff, it was an invaluable step.

Bickerstaff's arrival brought clarity. Known for his defensive discipline and straightforward approach, he quickly set a tone that resonated in the locker room. His schemes emphasize limiting transition opportunities for opponents, forcing contested shots and pounding the glass. Offensively, he prefers structure but isn't afraid to let his best playmakers freelance when matchups dictate. It's a style that meshes well with a group built on length, athleticism and an emerging star guard.

Cade Cunningham's breakout was the driving force. The No. 1 overall pick in 2021 became a first-time All-Star, commanding the offense with poise and taking over games when needed. His ability to manipulate defenses, find shooters and score in crunch time gives Detroit a franchise centerpiece.

But last season's success story was far from a one-man production. Forward Tobias Harris brought stability and leadership to a young roster in his second stint with the Pistons. Jalen Duren emerged as one of the league's most athletic and physical centers. Ausar Thompson became an elite wing defender capable of sparking offense through pure effort.

This season, the Pistons get an important reinforcement with the return of Jaden Ivey, a 2022 lottery pick who missed the second half of last season with a broken fibula. His speed, shot creation and scoring touch should immediately boost a backcourt that lost Sixth Man of the Year candidate Malik Beasley in free agency. Beasley spent the offseason being investigated for potential gambling infractions.

At any rate, Detroit seemingly addressed that loss with additions like Caris LeVert, who reunites with Bickerstaff from their days with the Cleveland Cavaliers, and Duncan Robinson, a proven shooter who could be an upgrade on the wing. With more depth, better health and the experience of a playoff run, the Pistons enter 2025-26 as a rising team in a wide-open Eastern Conference.

FRONTCOURT

Duren anchors the middle with elite rebounding, shot-blocking and rim-running. His ability to finish lobs and control the glass makes him a constant threat in the pick-and-roll. Harris remains a versa-

SCOUTING THE PISTONS

ANONYMOUS TAKES FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

"J.B. Bickerstaff clearly proved to be the right voice for this group. ... Now comes the real test, which is whether they can sustain it. ... Cade Cunningham is as important to them as Tyrese Haliburton was to Indiana, maybe more. ... This team could realistically make the Finals or get bounced in the first round, and neither outcome would shock me. ... I like the additions of Caris LeVert and Duncan Robinson, who both fill specific gaps in the rotation. ... The culture in Detroit is strong, and the roster is young, talented and hungry. ... With that combination, you feel like anything is possible — which is not something you've been able to say about the Pistons in a long time."



JADEN IVEY

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Record: 20-52	Record: 23-59	Record: 17-65	Record: 14-68	Record: 44-38
Division: 5th	Division: 5th	Division: 5th	Division: 5th	Division: 4th



CADE CUNNINGHAM



BEYOND THE ARC

CADE'S COMMAND

Point guard Cade Cunningham didn't just make the Eastern Conference All-Star team last season — he also took ownership of the Pistons. His ability to slow the game down and dictate pace should only get even better with age.

IVEY'S IMPACT Jaden Ivey's return from a broken fibula could change everything. His speed and slashing give Detroit a second creator and open up easier looks for everyone else.

HARRIS PROVIDES THE STEADY HAND Tobias Harris may not grab headlines, but his professionalism and scoring touch provide a stabilizing force for a roster still learning how to win consistently.

DUREN'S DEVELOPMENT Center Jalen Duren's athleticism is unquestioned. The next step is refining his post game and free-throw shooting so defenses can't simply play him for the lob.

BENCH BOOST Caris LeVert and Duncan Robinson bring two very different skill sets — ball-handling/energy vs. pure shooting — but combined, they could make Detroit's second unit one of the more balanced in the Eastern Conference.



DETROIT PISTONS

tile scorer at forward, capable of spacing the floor or working in the post while offering veteran steadiness to a younger roster. Thompson starts alongside them, bringing relentless perimeter defense and athletic finishing. His quick first step and anticipation on cuts give him value despite the fact that he's not generally initiating offense.

Depth is a strength. Isaiah Stewart brings physicality, shot-blocking and a willingness to mix it up inside. Paul Reed re-signed and provides hustle minutes at both power forward and center, keeping the Pistons competitive on the glass and defensively when starters rest.

Ron Holland's second season could see a jump in consistency after he flashed scoring potential as a rookie. This group's collective length allows Bickerstaff to switch more aggressively and shrink driving lanes against perimeter-heavy teams.

Against Eastern Conference contenders like the Cavaliers and New York Knicks, Detroit's frontcourt can match physicality and size. The challenge will be generating enough half-court offense when the game slows, especially in the postseason. Harris and Thompson will be called upon to knock down open shots while Duren continues developing as a low-post option.

BACKCOURT

Cunningham is unquestionably the engine. He's able to run the pick-and-roll, hit open shooters and score at all three levels. His decision-making and composure set the tone for Detroit's half-court offense. Ivey's return adds a dimension the Pistons lacked after his injury. He brings speed in transition, the ability to break down defenders off the dribble, and improved spot-up shooting. Together, they give Detroit a backcourt that can both create and finish, with Cunningham controlling the pace and Ivey pushing it.

LeVert adds size, ball-handling and defensive versatility off the bench, though his scoring can be streaky. He was a Bickerstaff favorite during their days with the Cavaliers. Robinson's shooting will stretch defenses and provide a consistent outlet when Cunningham or Ivey draws extra attention.

25.5

That was the over-under win total for Detroit entering last season. The Pistons shattered that projection by winning 44 games and making the playoffs. It was the clearest sign yet that this young roster is ahead of schedule in its climb up the Eastern Conference standings.



Duncan Robinson

OFFSEASON MOVES

DRAFT PICK
2 CHAZ LANIER
SG, 6-4, 206, Tennessee

Selected with the No. 37 overall pick, Lanier isn't likely to crack the rotation right away, but he's tough and can shoot. He reminds many of, well, Malik Beasley.

OTHER NEWCOMERS
The Pistons added veteran guard Caris LeVert and sharp-shooting forward Duncan Robinson to strengthen the rotation. LeVert's versatility allows him to handle the ball, defend multiple positions and fit into different lineup combinations. Robinson's shooting should help stretch the floor for Detroit's drivers and open up more space in the half court. Both bring playoff experience and a veteran presence to a team still shaping its identity as a contender.

ROSTER							2024-25 STATISTICS										48-MINUTE PRODUCTIVITY		
HEAD COACH: J.B. BICKERSTAFF (2ND SEASON; CAREER: 299-328)																			
#	PLAYER	POS	HT	WT	DOB	FROM	YRS	G	MPG	FG%	3P%	FT%	RPG	APG	PPG		REB	AST	PTS
2	Cade Cunningham	G	6-6	220	9/25/01	Oklahoma State	4	70	35.0	.469	.356	.846	6.1	9.1	26.1		8.3	12.5	35.8
23	Jaden Ivey	G	6-4	195	2/13/02	Purdue	3	30	29.9	.460	.409	.733	4.1	4.0	17.6		6.6	6.4	28.2
35	Tolu Smith	F	6-11	245	7/26/00	Mississippi State	1	1	22.4	.667	.000	.667	8.0	0.0	14.0		17.2	0.0	30.1
12	Tobias Harris	F	6-8	226	7/15/92	Tennessee	14	73	31.6	.477	.345	.861	5.9	2.2	13.7		9.0	3.4	20.9
8	Caris LeVert	G	6-6	205	8/25/94	Michigan	9	64	24.9	.467	.373	.710	3.2	3.4	12.1		6.1	6.5	23.3
0	Jalen Duren	C	6-10	250	11/18/03	Memphis	3	78	26.1	.692	.000	.669	10.3	2.7	11.8		19.0	4.9	21.7
55	Duncan Robinson	F	6-7	215	4/22/94	Michigan	7	74	24.1	.437	.393	.887	2.3	2.4	11.0		4.5	4.7	22.0
9	Ausar Thompson	G/F	6-6	205	1/30/03	Overtime Elite	2	59	22.5	.535	.224	.641	5.1	2.3	10.1		11.0	4.8	21.5
25	Marcus Sasser	G	6-2	195	9/21/00	Houston	2	57	14.2	.463	.382	.843	1.2	2.3	6.6		4.1	7.9	22.2
5	Ronald Holland II	F	6-8	206	7/07/05	G League Ignite	1	81	15.6	.474	.238	.754	2.7	1.0	6.4		8.3	3.1	19.8
28	Isaiah Stewart	F/C	6-8	250	5/22/01	Washington	5	72	19.9	.559	.321	.759	5.5	1.7	6.0		13.4	4.1	14.6
	Javonte Green	G	6-5	205	7/23/93	Radford	6	68	18.5	.429	.326	.724	3.2	0.8	5.1		8.3	2.1	13.2
7	Paul Reed	F	6-9	210	6/14/99	DePaul	5	45	9.7	.507	.286	.762	2.7	1.0	4.1		13.5	4.8	20.2
1	Colby Jones	G	6-6	207	5/28/02	Xavier	2	39	13.2	.457	.327	.657	2.2	1.1	4.0		8.1	4.1	14.6
34	Bobbi Klintman	F	6-9	225	3/06/03	Wake Forest	1	8	5.3	.600	.400	.500	0.9	0.9	1.9		7.9	7.9	17.0
24	Daniss Jenkins	G	6-3	165	8/17/01	St. John's	1	7	3.2	.300	.143	.000	0.3	0.4	1.0		4.2	6.3	14.8
20	Chaz Lanier	G	6-4	206	12/19/01	Tennessee													
							R — First NBA Season												



AUSAR THOMPSON

Marcus Sasser remains a promising young guard with a scorer’s mentality and will fight for reserve minutes, likely splitting time between backup point and off-ball shooting duties.

The backcourt rotation also allows Bickerstaff to stagger Cunningham’s and Ivey’s minutes, ensuring that at least one primary creator is on the floor at all times. If Robinson’s shooting holds up and Sasser continues to improve on the defensive end, Detroit’s guard play could be an underrated strength.

FINAL ANALYSIS

Detroit made the leap from cellar-dweller to playoff team in one season. Now, the challenge is proving that it was no fluke.

Cunningham’s emergence, Ivey’s return and Harris’ steadying influence give the Pistons a core that is capable of taking another step. Thompson, Duren, Stewart and the frontcourt depth can make them a nightmare to play physically.

Bickerstaff’s defense-first approach will keep the Pistons in games against anyone, but the offense will need to take another jump if they’re to push past the first round. Ivey’s health, Duren’s continued development and Robinson’s shooting will be key swing factors. Depth is no longer a potential weakness, and the Pistons’ ability to grind out wins in the regular season should put them in position for another playoff run.

Overall, the Pistons may not yet be ready to contend with the East’s elite, but they are past rebuilding and firmly in the mix for another playoff berth — and possibly a first-round series win. For a franchise that recently endured the longest losing streak in NBA history, that is no small turnaround. And in Detroit’s case, it feels like just the beginning.

2025-26 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 22	at Chicago	8:00
Oct. 24	at Houston	8:00
Oct. 26	Boston	3:30
Oct. 27	Cleveland	7:00
Oct. 29	Orlando	7:00

NOVEMBER

Nov. 1	Dallas	10:00
Nov. 3	at Memphis	8:00
Nov. 5	Utah	7:00
Nov. 7	at Brooklyn*	7:30
Nov. 9	at Philadelphia	7:30
Nov. 10	Washington	7:00
Nov. 12	Chicago	7:00
Nov. 14	Philadelphia*	7:30
Nov. 17	Indiana	7:00
Nov. 18	at Atlanta	8:00
Nov. 22	at Milwaukee	8:00
Nov. 24	at Indiana	7:00
Nov. 26	at Boston*	5:00
Nov. 28	Orlando*	7:30
Nov. 29	at Miami	8:00

DECEMBER

Dec. 1	Atlanta	7:00
Dec. 3	at Milwaukee	8:00
Dec. 5	Portland	7:30
Dec. 6	Milwaukee	7:30
Dec. 9, 10	Emirates NBA Cup Quarterfinals	
Dec. 13	Emirates NBA Cup Semifinals	
Dec. 16	Emirates NBA Cup Championship	
Dec. 18	at Dallas	8:30

Dec. 20	Charlotte	7:30
Dec. 22	at Portland	10:00
Dec. 23	at Sacramento	10:00
Dec. 26	at Utah	9:30
Dec. 28	at L.A. Clippers	9:00
Dec. 30	at L.A. Lakers	10:30

JANUARY

Jan. 1	Miami	7:00
Jan. 4	at Cleveland	2:00
Jan. 5	New York	7:00
Jan. 7	Chicago	7:00
Jan. 10	L.A. Clippers	7:30
Jan. 15	Phoenix	7:00
Jan. 17	Indiana	7:30
Jan. 19	Boston	8:00
Jan. 21	at New Orleans	8:00
Jan. 23	Houston	7:00
Jan. 25	Sacramento	3:00
Jan. 27	at Denver	9:00
Jan. 29	at Phoenix	9:00
Jan. 30	at Golden State	10:00

FEBRUARY

Feb. 1	Brooklyn	6:00
Feb. 3	Denver	7:00
Feb. 5	Washington	7:00
Feb. 6	New York	7:30
Feb. 9	at Charlotte	7:00
Feb. 11	at Toronto	7:30
Feb. 19	at New York	7:30
Feb. 21	at Chicago	8:00
Feb. 23	San Antonio	7:00

Feb. 25	Oklahoma City	7:00
Feb. 27	Cleveland	7:00

MARCH

March 1	at Orlando	6:00
March 3	at Cleveland	7:00
March 5	at San Antonio	8:00
March 7	Brooklyn	6:00
March 8	at Miami	6:00
March 10	at Brooklyn	7:30
March 12	Philadelphia	7:00
March 13	Memphis	7:30
March 15	at Toronto	3:30
March 17	at Washington	7:00
March 19	at Washington	7:00
March 20	Golden State	7:30
March 23	L.A. Lakers	7:00
March 25	Atlanta	7:00
March 26	New Orleans	7:00
March 28	at Minnesota	8:00
March 30	at Oklahoma City	9:30
March 31	Toronto	8:00

APRIL

April 2	Minnesota	7:00
April 4	at Philadelphia	7:00
April 6	at Orlando	7:00
April 8	Milwaukee	7:30
April 10	at Charlotte	7:00
April 12	at Indiana	6:00

*Emirates NBA Cup regular-season game
All times Eastern



TND PACERS

CENTRAL DIVISION PREDICTION: **4TH**

When Tyrese Haliburton caught the ball with 5:03 to go in the first quarter of Game 7 of the NBA Finals, the Indiana Pacers were closer to a title than they'd been since moving from the ABA in 1976.

The Pacers' two-time All-Star point guard seemed poised to do something special, which could have been enough to carry them over the Oklahoma City Thunder. Despite playing through a calf strain, Haliburton hit three 3-pointers in the game's first seven minutes to score nine of his team's first 16 points.

But then Haliburton took a step back to drive and fell to the floor, changing not only the course of Game 7 but also the trajectory of the Pacers' franchise. He had to be carried off with a torn right Achilles tendon, which will keep him off the floor for the entire 2025-26 season.

Prior to the injury, the Pacers appeared to be strong contenders to repeat as Eastern Conference champions. But just nine days after losing Game 7, they also lost center Myles Turner — the longest-tenured player on the team — to the Milwaukee Bucks in free agency.

The Pacers won the East in large part because they had developed a unique identity and created cohesion around that over the three full seasons they've had Haliburton. Now with Haliburton out and Turner gone, they have to find a way to maintain that identity without two of the players most responsible for it.

FRONTCOURT

The Pacers lost out on the opportunity to replace Turner with a player of his pedigree. Instead, they'll be trying to replace him in the aggregate.

The Pacers acquired Jay Huff from the Memphis Grizzlies via trade. The 27-year-old Huff had played just 31 NBA games with three different teams prior to 2024-25, but in his lone season with the Grizzlies, he showed signs of a skill set similar to Turner's. He hit 40.5% of his 3-pointers last season (81 of 200), so he could be an effective pick-and-pop threat as Turner has been.

The Pacers also re-signed both Isaiah Jackson and James Wiseman, backups to Turner at the start of the season who both tore their Achilles tendons in the first 10 days of the season and missed the rest of the campaign. Jackson is an outstanding floor runner, lob finisher, shot-blocker and rebounder. Wiseman, the No. 2 overall pick in the 2020 draft, showed good signs in the preseason.

The Pacers also have Tony Bradley — who made an impact on the glass in the playoffs — as a fourth option, though on a non-guaranteed contract.

SCOUTING THE PACERS

ANONYMOUS TAKES FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

"What a run they had to the NBA Finals. But without Tyrese Haliburton, it's just not happening again. ... The Achilles tear takes away their engine, and losing Myles Turner to Milwaukee only makes it worse. ... They didn't really find a true replacement for Turner, unless James Wiseman suddenly becomes the player people thought he'd be. ... Aaron Nembhard is solid, and Rick Carlisle's defensive schemes will give them a fighting chance most nights. ... Still, the ceiling is low without their best player and their starting center. ... By the end of the season, they may have to take a hard look at whether it's worth pushing or if they should just tank for a better pick."



ANDREW NEMBHARD

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Record: 34-38	Record: 25-57	Record: 35-47	Record: 47-35	Record: 50-32
Division: 2nd	Division: 4th	Division: 4th	Division: 3rd	Division: 2nd



PASCAL SIAKAM

BEYOND THE ARC

TAKE A KNEE Tyrese Haliburton still managed to have a memorable summer despite his injury. In July, he proposed to his longtime girlfriend, Jade Jones, at center court at Iowa State's Hilton Coliseum. They met in school there, and they have a dog named Ames. Despite his injury, Haliburton still got down on one knee, though his scooter was nearby and was in the photos the couple posted on Instagram. Haliburton was catching heat from teammates about procrastinating, especially after Obi Toppin proposed to his longtime girlfriend in Paris in January when the Pacers played two games against Victor Wembanyama and the San Antonio Spurs.

SEE YA The Pacers have mostly been quiet or complimentary of Myles Turner despite his departure. Turner said he informed the team he was leaving through the squad's group chat and that some of his teammates reached out to him after. However, Benedict Mathurin posted a video on Instagram of him dunking on Turner at a practice.

SETTING THE PACE Haliburton drove the pace car at the Indianapolis 500 in 2023, the last time the Pacers missed the playoffs. The past two seasons, the Pacers have played either the day of or the day before the Indy 500, so that hasn't been an option, but Pascal Siakam drove the pace car at the Brickyard 400, the annual NASCAR race at Indianapolis Motor Speedway. Among the highlights was a photo Siakam took with Cookie Monster of "Sesame Street."



T.J. McCONNELL

bench and first in total assists off the bench in the regular season last year. In the playoffs, McConnell was second in total points and first in assists by far.

The player who scored the most points off the bench in the playoffs was Bennedict Mathurin, and he will be returning to the starting lineup on a full-time basis as the shooting guard. Head coach Rick Carlisle and his staff are still working on rounding Mathurin’s edges so he makes quicker decisions and keeps the ball moving without taking away his aggression.

Aaron Nesmith’s playing style is a much more natural fit, and that’s why he’ll be the starting small forward to start the season. He doesn’t need the ball in his hands much to make an impact with much of his offense coming on catch-and-shoot 3s. He shot 43.1% from beyond the arc in the regular season and 49.2% in the playoffs. And along with Nembhard, Nesmith has been taking on top defensive assignments for each of the past three seasons.

The Pacers added another option at both guard spots in the draft, taking Kam Jones from Marquette. The Pacers have more depth at the wing spots in Ben Sheppard, Jarace Walker and Johnny Furphy.

The Pacers’ two-way contract players add depth. RayJ Dennis might be the most qualified player to be the third point guard. Quenton Jackson started games in November when the Pacers were short-handed, and second-round draft pick Taelon Peter had an impressive Summer League.

FINAL ANALYSIS

With Haliburton out and Turner gone, the Pacers will be expected to take a “gap year” before returning to contention in 2026-27. Another Eastern Conference title seems hard to imagine, but the remaining players have had too much of a taste of success and built too much cohesion to become a lottery team.

2025-26 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 23	Oklahoma City	7:30
Oct. 25	at Memphis	8:00
Oct. 26	at Minnesota	7:00
Oct. 29	at Dallas	8:30
Oct. 31	Atlanta*	7:00

NOVEMBER

Nov. 1	Golden State	7:00
Nov. 3	Milwaukee	7:00
Nov. 5	Brooklyn	7:00
Nov. 8	at Denver	9:00
Nov. 9	at Golden State	8:30
Nov. 11	at Utah	9:00
Nov. 13	at Phoenix	9:00
Nov. 15	Toronto	7:00
Nov. 17	at Detroit	7:00
Nov. 19	Charlotte	7:00
Nov. 21	at Cleveland*	7:00
Nov. 24	Detroit	7:00
Nov. 26	at Toronto*	7:30
Nov. 28	Washington*	7:30
Nov. 29	Chicago	7:30

DECEMBER

Dec. 1	Cleveland	7:00
Dec. 3	Denver	7:00
Dec. 5	at Chicago	8:00
Dec. 8	Sacramento	7:00
Dec. 9, 10	Emirates NBA Cup Quarterfinals	
Dec. 13	Emirates NBA Cup Semifinals	
Dec. 16	Emirates NBA Cup Championship	
Dec. 18	New York	7:00

Dec. 20	at New Orleans	7:00
Dec. 22	at Boston	7:30
Dec. 23	Milwaukee	7:30
Dec. 26	Boston	7:30
Dec. 27	at Miami	8:00
Dec. 29	at Houston	8:00
Dec. 31	Orlando	3:00

JANUARY

Jan. 2	San Antonio	7:00
Jan. 4	at Orlando	3:00
Jan. 6	Cleveland	7:00
Jan. 8	at Charlotte	7:00
Jan. 10	Miami	7:00
Jan. 12	Boston	7:30
Jan. 14	Toronto	7:00
Jan. 16	New Orleans	7:00
Jan. 17	at Detroit	7:30
Jan. 19	at Philadelphia	7:00
Jan. 21	at Boston	7:30
Jan. 23	at Oklahoma City	9:30
Jan. 26	at Atlanta	7:30
Jan. 28	Chicago	7:00
Jan. 31	Atlanta	7:00

FEBRUARY

Feb. 2	Houston	7:00
Feb. 3	Utah	7:00
Feb. 6	at Milwaukee	8:00
Feb. 8	at Toronto	3:00
Feb. 10	at New York	7:30
Feb. 11	at Brooklyn	7:30
Feb. 19	at Washington	7:00

Feb. 20	at Washington	7:00
Feb. 22	Dallas	5:00
Feb. 24	Philadelphia	7:00
Feb. 26	Charlotte	7:00

MARCH

March 1	Memphis	5:00
March 4	at L.A. Clippers	10:30
March 6	at L.A. Lakers	10:30
March 8	at Portland	9:00
March 10	at Sacramento	10:00
March 12	Phoenix	7:00
March 13	New York	7:30
March 15	at Milwaukee	3:30
March 17	at New York	7:30
March 18	Portland	7:30
March 21	at San Antonio	8:00
March 23	at Orlando	7:00
March 25	L.A. Lakers	7:00
March 27	L.A. Clippers	7:00
March 29	Miami	5:00

APRIL

April 1	at Chicago	8:00
April 3	at Charlotte	7:00
April 5	at Cleveland	6:00
April 7	Minnesota	8:00
April 9	at Brooklyn	7:30
April 10	Philadelphia	7:30
April 12	Detroit	6:00

*Emirates NBA Cup regular-season game
All times Eastern



MILWAUKEE BUCKS

CENTRAL DIVISION PREDICTION: **3RD**

After a third consecutive crushing first-round playoff series loss, the Milwaukee Bucks spent another offseason searching for answers and overhauling an aging roster. The Bucks will again be looking to franchise cornerstone Giannis Antetokounmpo to lead a deep play-off run, something that has eluded the team since winning it all in the 2020-21 season. However, little has gone Milwaukee's way in the postseason since, even with a roster that for two seasons featured a pair of superstars and sure-fire Hall of Famers — Antetokounmpo and sharp-shooting guard Damian Lillard.

The Bucks enter this season with Antetokounmpo and elite sixth man Bobby Portis as the lone holdovers from the championship team. Milwaukee traded small forward Khris Middleton to the Washington Wizards at the trade deadline, and the offseason saw the departures of center Brook Lopez and guard Pat Connaughton. The most shocking roster decision, by far, came when the Bucks waived Lillard — who was set to miss the season with a torn Achilles suffered in the playoffs — and stretched the remaining \$103 million on his contract to facilitate a deal for center Myles Turner, the Bucks' top offseason signing. The Bucks are counting on a combination of guards to replace Lillard.

Doc Rivers, who enters his second full season as head coach, will have a revamped lineup this season with Antetokounmpo, once again, as the undisputed leader. The Bucks re-signed several key players, meaning that much of last season's roster remains intact, and they made a surprising splash on the free-agent market by luring Turner away from the Central Division rival Indiana Pacers.

FRONTCOURT

As has been the case for more than a decade, the offense will be centered around Antetokounmpo, who will turn 31 in December and is entering his 13th season with the Bucks. He finished second in the league in scoring at 30.4 points per game on 60% shooting while pulling down 11.9 rebounds and dishing out 6.5 assists per contest and recording 11 triple-doubles. He was even better in the playoffs, averaging 33 points and 15.4 rebounds per game. Antetokounmpo remains a force, whether dominating in the paint or on powerful drives to the hoop on offense or exerting his presence on defense. His athleticism, conditioning and desire to win have shown no signs of waning, although he did miss time due to injury. Another MVP-like season out of Antetokounmpo would come as no surprise. In fact, it's expected.

Turner, whom the Bucks signed to a four-year, \$107 million deal after he spent 10 seasons with the Pacers, is a big-time addition to the Bucks' frontcourt. Although not an All-Star talent, Turner is

SCOUTING THE BUCKS

ANONYMOUS TAKES FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

"Myles Turner was a good pickup, but I'm not convinced it changes much when it matters most. ... Giannis Antetokounmpo will always give them a shot at greatness, and the big thing for Milwaukee is keeping him engaged and happy. ... They'll need a breakout year from Kyle Kuzma, but I'm still not sure he's the type of player who thrives on a winning team. ... The backcourt is the glaring issue. It was shaky even with Damian Lillard, and now without him, it's hard to see it improving in the playoffs. ... If they can't get consistent guard play, the ceiling is lower than they'd like, even with Giannis and Turner in the frontcourt."



KYLE KUZMA

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Record: 46-26	Record: 51-31	Record: 58-24	Record: 49-33	Record: 48-34
Division: 1st	Division: 1st	Division: 1st	Division: 1st	Division: 3rd



GIANNIS **ANTETOKOUNMPO**



BEYOND THE ARC

CONSISTENT CORNERSTONE Giannis Antetokounmpo finished second to Shai Gilgeous-Alexander in the league in scoring last season, averaging 30.4 points per game. In the 2023-24 season, Antetokounmpo also ranked second in scoring, to Luka Dončić, with exactly the same points-per-game average.

CREAM CITY COMEBACK The Bucks are bringing back their popular Cream City Edition uniforms for the 2025-26 season alongside a custom court at Fiserv Forum. The Bucks originally wore the cream-colored uniforms, an ode to the city's cream city brick construction, during the 2019-20 campaign before they were banned by the league because the color interfered with the technology used for on-court advertisements during live television broadcasts. Technological improvements have allowed for their return.

LIKE FATHER, LIKE DAUGHTER The towering Antetokounmpo and his tiny daughter Eva appear in an advertising campaign touting a new Huggies diaper. In a one-minute spot, a diaper-clad Eva mimics her dad's moves on the court before he lifts her up for a dunk. As part of the campaign, Huggies donated \$100,000 worth of diapers to the Milwaukee Diaper Mission.

FINAL PAIRING Only two players — Antetokounmpo and Bobby Portis — remain on the roster from the 2020-21 squad that captured the NBA title, the team's first since 1971 when Lew Alcindor (Kareem Abdul-Jabbar) and Oscar Robertson led the team. Brook Lopez and Pat Connaughton are the latest to depart.



MILWAUKEE BUCKS

impressive on both ends of the floor, averaging 15.6 points and 6.5 rebounds per game during the 2024-25 regular season. He’s also shown up big in the playoffs, especially as a rim protector, which is of vital importance to a Bucks team long-ing for a return to postseason success. They’ll be counting heavily on Turner.

Forward Kyle Kuzma, a major trade deadline acquisition last season whose time with the Bucks was inconsistent at best (especially in the playoffs), returns, and Milwaukee is seeking much more out of the 30-year-old. The Bucks re-signed Taurean Prince, who was a key contributor during the regular season, especially with his long-distance shooting. But Prince saw his minutes decline in the playoffs. His length and versatility remain important to the team’s defensive scheme, and he obviously showed enough for the Bucks to bring him back.

Jericho Sims, another trade deadline acquisition, is freaky athletic and a solid backup big, especially on defense. His offensive skills are raw, but he could see an expanded role. The fiery Portis, a fan favorite for his hustle and physical play, will continue to provide energy and scoring off the bench and adds a veteran presence to the locker room.

BACKCOURT

Gone is long-range scorer Lillard. He’ll be re-placed with a point guard by committee, of sorts. Kevin Porter Jr. is likely to get the starting nod, with newcomer Cole Anthony, the 15th overall pick in the 2020 draft, and holdover Ryan Rol-lins expected to contribute off the bench. The 25-year-old Porter turned out to be a surprisingly key contributor last season, shooting a career-best 49.4% from the field and 40.8% from 3-point range in 30 regular-season games for the Bucks. He’s expected to be a playmaker and a scorer and will have a major role. The Bucks sought Anthony for his dynamic playmaking, ability to create his own shot and high level of intensity and effort. Rollins, 23, brings youth to the guard spot after earning extended playing time last season, even making a few starts. He’s expected to be a long-range shooting option.

Combo guard Gary Trent Jr., a key free-agent

-10

Since winning 58 games in the 2022-23 season, the Bucks have seen their regular-season win total decline. The team went 49-33 in 2023-24 and 48-34 last season, a 10-game decline in two seasons. But numbers don’t always tell the story. The Bucks won the NBA title in 2020-21 after winning 46 regular-season games (72-game season due to the pandemic).



Myles Turner

OFFSEASON MOVES

DRAFT PICKS
2 BOGOLJUB MARKOVIĆ
F, 6-11, 210, KK Mega Basket (Serbia)

The Bucks didn’t have a first-round pick and drafted Marković in the second round (47th overall) as a “draft-and-stash” prospect. Marković, who turned 20 during a stint with the Bucks’ Summer League squad, will return to Europe for at least another season before potentially landing a roster spot with Milwaukee.

OTHER NEWCOMERS
Milwaukee, like it did last offsea-son, made its mark in free agency, most notably with the signing of 29-year-old center/power forward Myles Turner, who is expected to form a formidable duo on defense with Giannis Antetokounmpo. The Bucks added point guard depth by signing Cole Anthony. The team also focused heavily on re-signing key players.

ROSTER							2024-25 STATISTICS										48-MINUTE PRODUCTIVITY		
HEAD COACH: DOC RIVERS (3RD SEASON; CAREER: 1,162-816)																			
#	PLAYER	POS	HT	WT	DOB	FROM	YRS	G	MPG	FG%	3P%	FT%	RPG	APG	PPG		REB	AST	PTS
34	G. Antetokounmpo	F	6-11	243	12/06/94	Filathlitikos	12	67	34.2	.601	.222	.617	11.9	6.5	30.4		16.7	9.1	42.7
33	Myles Turner	C/F	6-11	250	3/24/96	Texas	10	72	30.2	.481	.396	.773	6.5	1.5	15.6		10.4	2.5	24.7
18	Kyle Kuzma	F	6-9	221	7/24/95	Utah	8	65	29.8	.436	.307	.634	5.7	2.3	14.8		9.2	3.8	23.9
9	Bobby Portis	F	6-10	250	2/10/95	Arkansas	10	49	25.4	.466	.365	.836	8.4	2.1	13.9		15.9	4.0	26.2
5	Gary Trent Jr.	G	6-5	204	1/18/99	Duke	7	74	25.6	.431	.416	.848	2.3	1.2	11.1		4.3	2.2	20.9
3	Kevin Porter Jr.	G/F	6-4	203	5/04/00	USC	5	75	19.8	.449	.311	.769	3.7	3.4	10.3		9.0	8.3	25.0
7	Amir Coffey	G/F	6-7	210	6/17/97	Minnesota	6	72	24.3	.471	.409	.891	2.2	1.1	9.7		4.4	2.1	19.1
25	Cole Anthony	G	6-2	185	5/15/00	North Carolina	5	67	18.4	.424	.353	.823	3.0	2.9	9.4		7.9	7.4	24.5
12	Taurean Prince	F	6-6	218	3/22/94	Baylor	9	80	27.1	.457	.439	.813	3.6	1.9	8.2		6.4	3.4	14.5
20	AJ Green	G	6-4	190	9/27/99	Northern Iowa	3	73	22.7	.429	.427	.815	2.4	1.5	7.4		5.0	3.1	15.7
13	Ryan Rollins	G	6-3	180	7/03/02	Toledo	3	56	14.6	.487	.408	.800	1.9	1.9	6.2		6.3	6.1	20.4
15	Jamaree Bouyea	G	6-2	180	6/27/99	San Francisco	3	5	12.3	.500	.200	.667	1.0	2.0	3.4		3.9	7.8	13.2
44	Andre Jackson Jr.	G	6-6	209	11/13/01	UConn	2	67	14.6	.477	.395	.500	2.7	1.2	3.4		8.9	4.1	11.3
14	Gary Harris	G	6-4	210	9/14/94	Michigan State	11	48	14.8	.383	.356	.583	1.3	0.6	3.0		4.3	2.0	9.8
21	Tyler Smith	F	6-9	224	11/02/04	G League Ignite	1	23	5.3	.480	.433	.750	1.1	0.2	2.9		9.9	1.6	26.5
35	Pete Nance	F	6-10	225	2/19/00	North Carolina	2	13	10.6	.438	.375	.500	1.6	0.8	2.9		7.3	3.5	13.2
00	Jericho Sims	C	6-10	250	10/20/98	Texas	4	53	11.9	.634	.000	.615	3.7	0.6	1.8		15.0	2.5	7.5
7	Chris Livingston	F	6-6	220	10/15/03	Kentucky	2	21	5.0	.333	.000	.750	1.7	0.2	1.4		15.9	2.3	13.6
23	Bogoljub Marković	F	6-11	210	7/12/05	Mega Basket													
	Mark Sears	G	6-1	185	2/19/02	Alabama													
								R — First NBA Season											
								R — First NBA Season											



BOBBY PORTIS

signing prior to last season, was one of the team’s most consistent performers and proved his value by performing especially well in the playoffs, which made retaining him a top offseason priority for the Bucks. Vastly improved shooting guard AJ Green has developed into a reliable and important option off the bench with his long-range shooting accuracy and ability to put up points in a hurry. Green has improved on defense and will be expected to take another step forward this season; his ability to space the floor and his off-ball movement are extremely critical to the Bucks’ offense.

FINAL ANALYSIS

This is a make-or-break season for the Bucks. Although still in his prime and at the top of his game, Antetokounmpo has been through the wear and tear of 13 grueling seasons. There’s a sense of urgency, too, with his current contract expiring after the 2027-28 season, although the last season of the deal is a player option, meaning that he’s only guaranteed to be in Milwaukee through the 2026-27 season, assuming the Bucks don’t make a blockbuster trade of their franchise player. The Bucks’ brass has repeatedly felt that they have assembled a roster that would compete for multiple NBA titles after capturing the league crown in the 2020-21 season. But age, key injuries and a post-championship roster mix that hasn’t jelled as expected have, to this point, doused the Bucks’ hope for another title.

This season’s squad will again feel the pressure to shed the recent postseason disappointment. Antetokounmpo continues to voice his desire to win another title in Milwaukee. The Bucks know they can count on him, but it’s going to take career years from some of his teammates for that to happen. The stark reality is that a playoff appearance with a first-round series victory would be welcomed at this point.

2025-26 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 22	Washington	8:00
Oct. 24	at Toronto	7:30
Oct. 26	at Cleveland	6:00
Oct. 28	New York	8:00
Oct. 30	Golden State	8:00

NOVEMBER

Nov. 1	Sacramento	5:00
Nov. 3	at Indiana	7:00
Nov. 4	at Toronto	7:30
Nov. 7	Chicago*	8:00
Nov. 9	Houston	3:30
Nov. 10	at Dallas	8:30
Nov. 12	at Charlotte	7:00
Nov. 14	Charlotte*	8:00
Nov. 15	L.A. Lakers	8:00
Nov. 17	at Cleveland	7:00
Nov. 20	Philadelphia	8:00
Nov. 22	Detroit	8:00
Nov. 24	Portland	8:00
Nov. 26	at Miami	7:30
Nov. 28	at New York*	7:30
Nov. 29	Brooklyn	8:00

DECEMBER

Dec. 1	at Washington	7:00
Dec. 3	Detroit	8:00
Dec. 5	Philadelphia	8:00
Dec. 6	at Detroit	7:30
Dec. 9, 10	Emirates NBA Cup Quarterfinals	
Dec. 13	Emirates NBA Cup Semifinals	
Dec. 16	Emirates NBA Cup Championship	

Dec. 18	Toronto	8:00
Dec. 21	at Minnesota	7:00
Dec. 23	at Indiana	7:30
Dec. 26	at Memphis	8:00
Dec. 27	at Chicago	8:00
Dec. 29	at Charlotte	7:00
Dec. 31	Washington	8:00

JANUARY

Jan. 2	Charlotte	8:00
Jan. 4	at Sacramento	9:00
Jan. 7	at Golden State	10:00
Jan. 9	at L.A. Lakers	10:30
Jan. 11	at Denver	8:00
Jan. 13	Minnesota	8:00
Jan. 15	at San Antonio	8:00
Jan. 19	at Atlanta	1:00
Jan. 21	Oklahoma City	9:30
Jan. 23	Denver	8:00
Jan. 25	Dallas	7:00
Jan. 27	at Philadelphia	8:00
Jan. 29	at Washington	7:00

FEBRUARY

Feb. 1	at Boston	3:30
Feb. 3	Chicago	8:00
Feb. 4	New Orleans	8:00
Feb. 6	Indiana	8:00
Feb. 9	at Orlando	7:30
Feb. 11	at Orlando	7:00
Feb. 12	at Oklahoma City	7:30
Feb. 20	at New Orleans	8:00
Feb. 22	Toronto	3:30

Feb. 24	Miami	8:00
Feb. 25	Cleveland	8:00
Feb. 27	New York	8:00

MARCH

March 1	at Chicago	3:30
March 2	Boston	7:30
March 4	Atlanta	9:30
March 7	Utah	8:00
March 8	Orlando	8:00
March 10	Phoenix	8:00
March 12	at Miami	7:30
March 14	at Atlanta	3:00
March 15	Indiana	3:30
March 17	Cleveland	8:00
March 19	at Utah	9:00
March 21	at Phoenix	10:00
March 23	at L.A. Clippers	10:30
March 25	at Portland	10:00
March 28	San Antonio	3:00
March 29	L.A. Clippers	3:30

APRIL

April 1	at Houston	8:00
April 3	Boston	8:00
April 5	Memphis	3:30
April 7	at Brooklyn	7:30
April 8	at Detroit	7:30
April 10	Brooklyn	8:00
April 12	at Philadelphia	6:00

*Emirates NBA Cup regular-season game
All times Eastern



ATLANTA HAWKS

SOUTHEAST DIVISION PREDICTION: **2ND**

Trapped in the Play-In Tournament wilderness for the past four seasons, the Atlanta Hawks look to be in position to need just the standard 82 games to reach the NBA playoffs in 2025-26. A strong offseason that saw the team add Kristaps Porziņģis, Nickeil Alexander-Walker and a potentially high first-round pick for 2026, in addition to the expected full return to health of budding star Jalen Johnson, provides reason for optimism. Add to that some uncertainty within the Eastern Conference, and there is legitimate hope for the Hawks to not only land in the playoffs but also advance past the first round for the first time since 2021.

The timing of this newfound momentum, coming after winning between 36 and 43 games each season for the past five seasons, could affect the future of the team's cornerstone for the last seven. Trae Young, a four-time All-Star, is under contract for 2025-26 and has a player option for 2026-27 at \$49 million. He is eligible for an extension, but the sides have not locked anything up. Will the Hawks consider trading Young and build around Johnson and other young, emerging stars? Or will they extend Young and continue to make him the team's fulcrum?

FRONTCOURT

The Hawks' frontcourt is young and full of potential. Johnson has the highest ceiling for the coming season after showing flashes last year before a torn labrum ended his campaign after 36 games.

Johnson enters his fifth season at 24 and is in the first year of a five-year contract. The Hawks believe he has shown growth and has the potential to be an All-Star. Johnson averaged 18.9 points, 10.0 rebounds and 5.0 assists last season, all career highs. His skills in the open floor are elite, and he is a strong rebounder, especially at the defensive end. He showed the ability to create last season for the first time in his career, becoming an initiator of the offense at times with Young on the bench. His trajectory continues to point upward. This issue is availability — he missed 46 games last season and 26 games the previous season. He needs to stay on the floor for the Hawks to be a factor in the Eastern Conference.

Zaccharie Risacher, who finished runner-up in Rookie of the Year voting last season after the Hawks drafted him No. 1 overall, is slated to start again at small forward. He averaged 12.6 points and 3.6 rebounds in 73 starts, shooting 35.5% from 3-point range. Risacher had his ups and downs but made steady progress. He needs to get stronger physically to enhance his defense, which is otherwise

SCOUTING THE HAWKS

ANONYMOUS TAKES
FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

"Trae Young had the best season of his career in terms of running an offense. They tried to make him Steph Curry, but now he's more like Steve Nash, and it works beautifully. ... Jalen Johnson is on the rise, and if he comes back from injury anywhere close to what he was, this team becomes a real problem. ... Getting Kristaps Porziņģis for basically nothing was a steal. Of course, he's another guy who struggles to stay healthy, but if he does, they're dangerous. ... The roster has really responded to Quin Snyder's coaching, and it clearly shows in their play. ... There's real upside here if their top guys can stay on the court."



DYSON
DANIELS

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Record: 41-31	Record: 43-39	Record: 41-41	Record: 36-46	Record: 40-42
Division: 1st	Division: 2nd	Division: 2nd	Division: 3rd	Division: 2nd



TRAЕ YOUNG



BEYOND THE ARC

GREAT BARRIER THIEF

The NBA has not seen a ball-stealer quite like Dyson Daniels in quite some time. The Australian with the killer nickname had more steals (229) than any other player since Gary Payton in the 1995-96 season. His gap over second-place Shai Gilgeous-Alexander was the largest between a No. 1 and No. 2 player in the category in league history, and his steal-to-foul ratio was the ninth-best since 1974 and tops since Allen Iverson in 2003. He also led the league in stocks (steals and blocks), the first guard to do so since Michael Jordan in 1987-88.

MR. CONSISTENT In the past three seasons, Trae Young has shot 47.6%, 47.9% and 47.4% from 2-point range. He is shooting 48.8% in his seven-year career.

THE BEST ABILITY IS AVAILABILITY The Hawks celebrated the acquisition of Kristaps Porziņģis, and for good reason. The 7-foot-2 center has a career average of 20 points per game and is one of the best 3-point shooting big men in the NBA. The Hawks might want to plan on seeing him only about 60% of the time, however. In his 10-year career, Porziņģis has played in only 61% of his regular-season games due to various injuries. In his last two years with the Celtics, he played in 60% of the regular-season games and 60% of the playoff games. He did, however, help the Celtics win the NBA title in 2024.





JALEN JOHNSON

old Australian led the league with an incredible 229 steals, 98 more than league MVP Shai Gilgeous-Alexander, who was second in the category. Daniels got better on the offensive end as the season wore on and averaged 14.1 points per game while shooting 49.3% from the field on his way to the NBA Most Improved Player award.

The Hawks signed Luke Kennard, who played for the Memphis Grizzlies the past three seasons, in free agency. The eight-year veteran is one of the best 3-point shooters in league history and will play a major role off the bench in Atlanta. Kennard is a career 44% 3-point shooter and should be in a position to take advantage of the attention Young draws to get open looks. Kennard led the NBA in 3-point percentage in the 2021-22 and 2022-23 seasons.

Vít Krejčí and Kobe Bufkin also return and should see minutes, but they would likely have a hard time cracking a playoff rotation if the Hawks enter the postseason fully healthy.

FINAL ANALYSIS

The Hawks' top seven players will be an average of 26 years old on opening night, with Porziņģis the oldest at 30. This is a young team that should stay healthy and has a chance to develop over the next few years around Young (should he sign an extension). Add to that two first-round picks next season, with one being the better pick of either the New Orleans Pelicans or Milwaukee Bucks, and there is reason to think this team will be a factor in the upper half of the Eastern Conference in the near future. The Hawks are not overly deep, but head coach Quin Snyder has some interesting combinations that should make the Hawks flexible and competitive. They won't need to worry about the Play-In Tournament this season.

2025-26 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 22	Toronto	7:30
Oct. 24	at Orlando	7:00
Oct. 25	Oklahoma City	7:30
Oct. 27	at Chicago	8:00
Oct. 29	at Brooklyn	7:30
Oct. 31	at Indiana*	7:00

NOVEMBER

Nov. 2	at Cleveland	6:00
Nov. 4	Orlando	8:00
Nov. 7	Toronto*	7:30
Nov. 8	L.A. Lakers	8:00
Nov. 10	at L.A. Clippers	10:30
Nov. 12	at Sacramento	10:00
Nov. 13	at Utah	9:00
Nov. 16	at Phoenix	8:00
Nov. 18	Detroit	7:00
Nov. 20	at San Antonio	8:00
Nov. 22	at New Orleans	7:00
Nov. 23	Charlotte	6:00
Nov. 25	at Washington*	7:00
Nov. 28	Cleveland*	7:30
Nov. 30	at Philadelphia	6:00

DECEMBER

Dec. 1	at Detroit	7:00
Dec. 3	L.A. Clippers	7:30
Dec. 5	Denver	7:30
Dec. 6	at Washington	7:00
Dec. 9, 10	Emirates NBA Cup Quarterfinals	
Dec. 13	Emirates NBA Cup Semifinals	
Dec. 16	Emirates NBA Cup Championship	

Dec. 18	at Charlotte	7:00
Dec. 19	San Antonio	7:30
Dec. 21	Chicago	3:30
Dec. 23	Chicago	7:30
Dec. 26	Miami	7:00
Dec. 27	New York	8:00
Dec. 29	at Oklahoma City	8:00
Dec. 31	Minnesota	3:00

JANUARY

Jan. 2	at New York	7:30
Jan. 3	at Toronto	7:30
Jan. 5	at Toronto	7:30
Jan. 7	New Orleans	7:30
Jan. 9	at Denver	9:00
Jan. 11	at Golden State	8:30
Jan. 13	at L.A. Lakers	10:30
Jan. 15	at Portland	10:00
Jan. 17	Boston	7:30
Jan. 19	Milwaukee	1:00
Jan. 21	at Memphis	8:00
Jan. 23	Phoenix	7:30
Jan. 26	Indiana	7:30
Jan. 28	at Boston	7:30
Jan. 29	Houston	8:00
Jan. 31	at Indiana	7:00

FEBRUARY

Feb. 3	at Miami	7:30
Feb. 5	Utah	7:30
Feb. 7	Charlotte	7:30
Feb. 9	at Minnesota	8:00
Feb. 11	at Charlotte	7:00

Feb. 19	at Philadelphia	7:00
Feb. 20	Miami	7:30
Feb. 22	Brooklyn	3:30
Feb. 24	Washington	7:30
Feb. 26	Washington	7:30

MARCH

March 1	Portland	6:00
March 4	at Milwaukee	9:30
March 7	Philadelphia	7:30
March 10	Dallas	8:00
March 12	Brooklyn	7:30
March 14	Milwaukee	3:00
March 16	Orlando	7:00
March 18	at Dallas	8:30
March 20	at Houston	8:00
March 21	Golden State	8:00
March 23	Memphis	7:00
March 25	at Detroit	7:00
March 27	at Boston	7:30
March 28	Sacramento	7:30
March 30	Boston	7:30

APRIL

April 1	at Orlando	7:30
April 3	at Brooklyn	7:30
April 6	New York	7:00
April 8	at Cleveland	7:00
April 10	Cleveland	7:30
April 12	at Miami	6:00

**Emirates NBA Cup regular-season game
All times Eastern*



CHARLOTTE HORNETS

SOUTHEAST DIVISION PREDICTION: 4TH

After winning only 19 games last season, the Charlotte Hornets clearly have a lot of work to do in order to end their league-worst nine-year playoff drought. They're trending in the right direction, making some offseason personnel moves that should lead to a more interesting watch this upcoming season.

LaMelo Ball is entering his sixth season. His up-and-down health will, as always, be the main factor in just how interesting the Hornets will be, although there are some other good young pieces worth watching with this roster.

Kon Knueppel, the No. 4 pick in this year's NBA Draft, is coming off a Summer League performance in which he led his team to a championship and won the game's MVP honors. Brandon Miller is one of the most promising third-year players in the league. And rookie big man Ryan Kalkbrenner could be one of the steals of the second round.

Adding to that young core are three newly acquired veteran guards. Collin Sexton is a microwave scorer who was buried on a bad Utah Jazz team. Pat Connaughton was a financial casualty for the Milwaukee Bucks. And Spencer Dinwiddie is a proven playmaker who was a steal as a minimum-salaried signing.

There are still some glaring holes on this team, particularly at center. But the team's new additions, along with the return of forward Grant Williams from a torn ACL, should have the Hornets fielding a slightly more competitive team.

FRONTCOURT

A wrist injury shortened Miller's second season to 27 games, but he should be fully recovered. He has looked like a good three-level scorer and played solid defense, mimicking the game of his favorite player, Paul George. He will have to improve his efficiency in order to fulfill his All-Star potential. He should be the team's second-best player behind Ball this year.

Miles Bridges slots in at the other starting forward spot. He's a proven scorer who has averaged more than 20 points per game for three straight seasons. Can he clean up his decision-making and make more winning plays? He needs to show that he can do more than just put the ball in the basket.

Williams, a more well-rounded but less dangerous scorer, will be a good backup behind both forwards. He's a gritty defender who can guard multiple positions and hit open 3-pointers. Rookie Liam McNeeley should get some developmental minutes as a toolsy scorer.

Who will start at center for the Hornets? That is this team's Achil-

SCOUTING THE HORNETS

ANONYMOUS TAKES FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

"They have a lot of guards and a lot of ball-dominant people. ... LaMelo Ball needs to stay on the floor, for starters. That said, I'm not always sure his great numbers are winning numbers. ... Brandon Miller may be their actual best player. He's a problem. ... Collin Sexton was a nice pickup, but he's a career sixth man, microwave off the bench. I don't see how you can ever play Sexton and Ball together. ... They need to give young guys like Kon Knueppel and Tidjane Salaün a chance. The veteran guys aren't going to help you win that much, anyway. ... Miles Bridges is a scorer, but what else does he do? The roster seems littered with guys like that."

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Record: 33-39	Record: 43-39	Record: 27-55	Record: 21-61	Record: 19-63
Division: 4th	Division: 3rd	Division: 5th	Division: 4th	Division: 4th



BRANDON MILLER

FROM LEFT: MARK J. REBILAS-IMAGN IMAGES; MARY MERTENS-IMAGN IMAGES



LAMELO BALL



BEYOND THE ARC

CHAMPIONSHIP SUMMER It may just be a Summer League title, but the Hornets winning the Las Vegas tournament for the first time was a major milestone in the franchise's history. They have never won any sort of championship as a franchise at the NBA or G-League level.

WIZARDS KRYPTONITE The Hornets weren't the worst team in the Eastern Conference last season according to the numbers. That dishonor belonged to the Washington Wizards, who finished with just 18 wins. Miles Bridges may think differently, though. After Washington went 4-0 against Charlotte last year, Bridges noted, "They are supposed to be the worst team in the league, and they beat us four times. So what does that make us?"

HORNETS FAN Seventh-year forward Grant Williams grew up in Charlotte, and he has loved being back home. "I was able to find my love for basketball again in Charlotte," he noted before the season started. "I'm in a great situation now in Charlotte, where these guys are driven to make us the best organization in the NBA. They really care about that, and it's truly passionate for them."



les heel. Hornets fans are familiar with Mason Plumlee, who previously started 129 games for the team (2021-23) and is back after stints with the Los Angeles Clippers and Phoenix Suns. The 35-year-old veteran is far too limited to be starting for a good team, but he may be the best option.

Moussa Diabaté is young and energetic but too limited offensively to be playing big minutes. Kalkbrenner will need time to learn the league.

Some sort of in-season trade may be forthcoming. Mark Williams looked like a promising big man to build around, but the Hornets traded him to the Suns on the night of the draft without bringing in a capable replacement.

BACKCOURT

Ball is one of the most creative players in the league. He keeps on adding to his repertoire of moves. He's the king of the one-legged 3-pointer; he throws daring passes that nobody else would think to try; and he has nice touch on his floaters. He is the engine of what could be a great offense.

Ball's injuries have torpedoed the Hornets for several years in a row. He needs to stay healthy. While he is an immense talent, he also needs to clean up his overall game. He can be sloppy with the ball, and his defense has been a major weak point. If the Hornets want to win, then he has to bring more intensity to that end of the floor.

Knueppel should get the other backcourt starting spot. The rookie is a perfect fit next to Ball. He was a great shooter at Duke, hitting 40.6% of his 3-pointers. He can also do some secondary play-making and keep pace with Ball as the team runs out in transition.

The Hornets have a ton of depth behind those two. Sexton is a starting-level player who can score 20 points per game in his sleep. Dinwiddie is a capable starter and playmaker as well. Tre Mann is a natural scorer. Josh Green is a diligent defender who has developed into a reliable shooter. One of those four might need to be moved because they're all good enough to have a spot in an NBA rotation.

The team needs to find minutes for Sion James,

35.8

LaMelo Ball has missed an average of 35.8 games per season throughout his five-year career. With him in the lineup, the Hornets are 98-133 (.424 winning percentage). Without him, they're a miserable 45-124 (.266).



Kon Knueppel

OFFSEASON MOVES

DRAFT PICKS

1 KON KNUEPPEL
G/F, 6-5, 215, Duke

1 LIAM MCNEELEY
F, 6-7, 210, UConn

2 SION JAMES
G/F, 6-6, 220, Duke

2 RYAN KALKBRENNER
C, 7-1, 256, Creighton

Knueppel doesn't have All-NBA upside, but he could one day be an All-Star. McNeeley was a highly touted recruit. James slots in as more of a role player with great defensive tools. Kalkbrenner is a good drop defender and can finish well at the basket.

OTHER NEWCOMERS

Charlotte traded for veteran guards in Collin Sexton and Pat Connaughton. They reunited with Mason Plumlee and brought Spencer Dinwiddie in on minimum contracts in free agency.

ROSTER							2024-25 STATISTICS										48-MINUTE PRODUCTIVITY		
HEAD COACH: CHARLES LEE (2ND SEASON; CAREER: 19-63)																			
#	PLAYER	POS	HT	WT	DOB	FROM	YRS	G	MPG	FG%	3P%	FT%	RPG	APG	PPG		REB	AST	PTS
1	LaMelo Ball	G	6-7	180	8/22/01	Illawarra	5	47	32.0	.405	.339	.843	4.9	7.4	25.2		7.4	11.0	37.8
24	Brandon Miller	F	6-7	200	11/22/02	Alabama	2	27	34.2	.403	.355	.861	4.9	3.6	21.0		6.8	5.1	29.5
0	Miles Bridges	F	6-7	225	3/21/98	Michigan State	6	64	31.7	.431	.313	.870	7.5	3.9	20.3		11.4	5.9	30.8
2	Collin Sexton	G	6-3	190	1/04/99	Alabama	7	63	27.9	.480	.406	.865	2.7	4.2	18.4		4.7	7.2	31.6
23	Tre Mann	G	6-3	178	2/03/01	Florida	4	13	24.5	.435	.400	.905	2.9	3.0	14.1		5.7	5.9	27.5
26	Spencer Dinwiddie	G	6-5	215	4/06/93	Colorado	11	79	27.0	.416	.334	.802	2.6	4.4	11.0		4.7	7.8	19.6
2	Grant Williams	F	6-6	236	11/30/98	Tennessee	6	16	29.9	.439	.365	.838	5.1	2.3	10.4		8.2	3.7	16.6
8	Nick Smith Jr.	G	6-2	185	4/18/04	Arkansas	2	60	22.8	.391	.340	.935	2.1	2.4	9.9		4.5	5.1	20.7
25	KJ Simpson	G	6-0	189	8/08/02	Colorado	1	36	23.4	.346	.254	.820	3.0	3.1	7.8		6.2	6.4	16.1
10	Josh Green	G	6-5	200	11/16/00	Arizona	5	68	27.8	.428	.391	.681	2.5	1.6	7.4		4.4	2.7	12.9
12	Antonio Reeves	G	6-5	205	11/20/00	Kentucky	1	44	15.0	.456	.395	.800	1.4	0.9	6.9		4.6	2.8	22.2
3	DaQuan Jeffries	G/F	6-5	222	8/30/97	Tulsa	6	47	22.8	.405	.335	.800	2.9	1.1	6.7		6.0	2.4	14.1
31	Tidjane Salaün	F	6-8	207	8/10/05	Cholet	1	60	20.7	.330	.283	.713	4.7	1.2	5.9		10.8	2.9	13.6
14	Moussa Diabaté	F	6-9	210	1/21/02	Michigan	3	71	17.5	.596	.000	.595	6.2	0.8	5.7		16.9	2.2	15.6
24	Pat Connaughton	G	6-5	209	1/06/93	Notre Dame	10	41	14.7	.469	.321	.774	2.7	1.7	5.3		8.7	5.6	17.2
22	Mason Plumlee	F/C	6-10	254	3/05/90	Duke	12	74	17.6	.619	.000	.648	6.1	1.8	4.5		16.8	4.9	12.3
13	Drew Peterson	F	6-9	205	11/09/99	USC	2	25	7.4	.415	.394	.778	1.6	0.5	2.2		10.3	3.4	13.9
4	Sion James	G	6-6	220	12/04/02	Duke													
11	Ryan Kalkbrenner	C	7-1	256	1/17/02	Creighton													
7	Kon Knueppel	G/F	6-5	215	8/03/05	Duke													
33	Liam McNeeley	F	6-7	210	10/10/05	UConn													



MILES BRIDGES

a defensive-minded guard from Duke whom they selected with the No. 33 pick of the 2025 draft, and Nick Smith Jr., who started 27 games last season.

FINAL ANALYSIS

Charlotte has a young team that should play fast and score a lot of points. That leans into the style that is becoming more and more popular in today’s NBA.

Second-year head coach Charles Lee must get his team to defend in order to win more games, and that is a real challenge due to weak defensive personnel at multiple positions. The Hornets will likely possess a bottom-10 defense.

Even with those issues, Charlotte should be fun and improve upon its 19-63 record from last season. Knueppel is a high-floor rookie whom fans should embrace. Miller is continually getting better, and Ball is exhilarating. That’s not a bad core to work with.

The Hornets are far from a finished product. This year is mostly about continuing to build patiently and getting those three to improve. Forward Tidjane Salaün, the No. 6 overall pick in 2024, also needs major development.

The team will have a premium pick in a strong 2026 draft, along with another heavily protected pick that will land at the end of the first round. The Hornets are still firmly in rebuild mode, but they have some promising players and assets that look like a good foundation for the future.

There’s a clear team-building philosophy in place here — loading up on hard-working, young, unselfish players. The Hornets haven’t traditionally been a great drafting team, but a relatively new regime is trying to set that right with a new approach.

2025-26 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 22	Brooklyn	7:00
Oct. 25	at Philadelphia	7:30
Oct. 26	at Washington	6:00
Oct. 28	at Miami	7:30
Oct. 30	Orlando	7:00

NOVEMBER

Nov. 1	Minnesota	6:00
Nov. 2	Utah	6:00
Nov. 4	at New Orleans	8:00
Nov. 7	at Miami*	8:00
Nov. 10	L.A. Lakers	7:00
Nov. 12	Milwaukee	7:00
Nov. 14	at Milwaukee*	8:00
Nov. 15	Oklahoma City	7:00
Nov. 17	at Toronto	7:30
Nov. 19	at Indiana	7:00
Nov. 22	L.A. Clippers	1:00
Nov. 23	at Atlanta	6:00
Nov. 26	New York*	7:00
Nov. 28	Chicago*	7:30
Nov. 29	Toronto	6:00

DECEMBER

Dec. 1	at Brooklyn	7:30
Dec. 3	at New York	7:30
Dec. 5	at Toronto	7:30
Dec. 7	Denver	6:00
Dec. 9, 10	Emirates NBA Cup Quarterfinals	
Dec. 13	Emirates NBA Cup Semifinals	
Dec. 16	Emirates NBA Cup Championship	
Dec. 18	Atlanta	7:00

Dec. 20	at Detroit	7:30
Dec. 22	at Cleveland	7:00
Dec. 23	Washington	7:00
Dec. 26	at Orlando	7:00
Dec. 29	Milwaukee	7:00
Dec. 31	Golden State	1:00

JANUARY

Jan. 2	at Milwaukee	8:00
Jan. 3	at Chicago	8:00
Jan. 5	at Oklahoma City	8:00
Jan. 7	Toronto	7:00
Jan. 8	Indiana	7:00
Jan. 10	at Utah	9:30
Jan. 12	at L.A. Clippers	10:30
Jan. 15	at L.A. Lakers	10:30
Jan. 17	at Golden State	8:30
Jan. 18	at Denver	8:00
Jan. 21	Cleveland	7:00
Jan. 22	at Orlando	7:00
Jan. 24	Washington	6:00
Jan. 26	Philadelphia	7:00
Jan. 28	at Memphis	8:00
Jan. 29	at Dallas	8:30
Jan. 31	San Antonio	3:00

FEBRUARY

Feb. 2	New Orleans	7:00
Feb. 5	at Houston	8:00
Feb. 7	at Atlanta	7:30
Feb. 9	Detroit	7:00
Feb. 11	Atlanta	7:00
Feb. 19	Houston	7:00

Feb. 20	Cleveland	7:00
Feb. 22	at Washington	6:00
Feb. 24	at Chicago	8:00
Feb. 26	at Indiana	7:00
Feb. 28	Portland	1:00

MARCH

March 3	Dallas	7:00
March 4	at Boston	7:30
March 6	Miami	7:00
March 8	at Phoenix	9:00
March 10	at Portland	10:00
March 11	at Sacramento	10:00
March 14	at San Antonio	8:00
March 17	Miami	7:00
March 19	Orlando	7:00
March 21	Memphis	7:00
March 24	Sacramento	7:00
March 26	New York	7:00
March 28	Philadelphia	6:00
March 29	Boston	6:00
March 31	at Brooklyn	7:30

APRIL

April 2	Phoenix	7:00
April 3	Indiana	7:00
April 5	at Minnesota	7:00
April 7	at Boston	7:30
April 10	Detroit	7:00
April 12	at New York	6:00

**Emirates NBA Cup regular-season game
All times Eastern*



MTA HEAT

SOUTHEAST DIVISION PREDICTION: **3RD**

There's a saying you'll hear in the halls of Kaseya Center quite often: Keep the main thing the main thing. And for the Miami Heat, the main thing is winning basketball games.

Only, last season, it wasn't. Jimmy Butler's rage-quitting on the team stole the show. Even after Butler was traded to the Golden State Warriors in February, the hangover stunted the Heat's ability to move forward. They dragged themselves into the playoffs but were embarrassed by the Cleveland Cavaliers, who throttled them by an average of 30.5 points in a four-game sweep.

A welcome summer break, complete with self-reflection and touching grass, was exactly what this team needed.

Now, as the 2025-26 season approaches, the Heat will return to training camp eager to launch a new era. There are reasons to believe that this new era will begin better than the last one ended.

FRONTCOURT

If we're exiting the "Jimmy Butler era," perhaps the next one might be called the "Bam Adebayo era." For that to happen, Adebayo will need a bounce-back season after shooting a career-low 48.5% from the field.

The bounce-back may have already started. In January, while Butler's trade demand was dominating national headlines, head coach Erik Spoelstra decided to start rookie Kel'el Ware at center and move Adebayo to power forward. That change helped turn Adebayo's season around. Instead of trying to shoot over opposing 7-footers, Adebayo was able to use his size and athleticism to his advantage while battling opposing forwards. His shooting improved from 45.5% to 51.4% overall. The position change cleared the way for him to spend more time on the perimeter, where he made 42.5% of his 3-point attempts over the second half of the season.

The Heat won the minutes with Adebayo and Ware on the court together by 4.2 points per 100 possessions. They'll start the season trying to build on that success.

The Heat have a lot riding on Ware, last year's first-round pick who was considered off-limits in trade talks for Kevin Durant this summer. At 7-feet, 230 pounds, Ware has flashed the potential to be a double-double machine who is also capable of making open 3-pointers. He needs to improve his consistency on the boards and as a rim protector. He has the inside track on a starting job, but it's not guaranteed.

Nikola Jović figures to be the third rotation big and can play

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Record: 40-32	Record: 53-29	Record: 44-38	Record: 46-36	Record: 37-45
Division: 2nd	Division: 1st	Division: 1st	Division: 2nd	Division: 3rd

SCOUTING THE HEAT

ANONYMOUS TAKES
FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

"Losing Jimmy Butler to the Warriors in February was a huge blow, and you could see how much they missed his leadership in big moments. ... Bam Adebayo remains the heartbeat of the defense and one of the most versatile bigs in the league, but he can only do so much. ... Tyler Herro can score, but he's still more streaky than steady. ... Norman Powell was a smart pickup and should give them a reliable perimeter threat, but it's hard to replace Butler's toughness and playoff know-how. ... Erik Spoelstra will keep them organized and competitive, but without that clear go-to guy in crunch time, they're more scrappy than scary in the East."



BAM
ADEBAYO

FROM LEFT: DAVID BANKS-IMAGN IMAGES; DAVID BANKS-IMAGN IMAGES



TYLER HERRO

BEYOND THE ARC

SPOELSTRA CHALLENGES WARE After Kel’el Ware got off to a slow start in the Summer League, head coach Erik Spoelstra challenged the second-year center to be more professional. “A big part of this is he has to really embrace and improve his professionalism, his consistency, his approach every single day,” Spoelstra said. “He has to get better with that. It’s learning how to become a pro. I understand that he was 20 last year and he’s 21. But we have bigger expectations.” It was a rare move by Spoelstra, who seldom uses the media to relay messages to his players. And it worked. Ware responded by totaling 42 points, 24 rebounds and four blocks across the next two games.

OUT WITH THE OLD, IN WITH THE NEW Norman Powell will take Jimmy Butler’s old stall in the Heat locker room. After Butler was traded in February, his locker was empty for the remainder of the season.

GAME RESPECT GAME Davion Mitchell told the Locked On Heat podcast that he believed Bam Adebayo to be the best defensive player in the league. Talking with reporters after Mitchell re-signed with the team, Adebayo reciprocated the compliment. “Davion being back, obviously, we’ve been missing somebody that can really play on-ball defense,” he said.

//// MIAMI HEAT ////

alongside either Adebayo or Ware (he should be something like Miami’s version of the Minnesota Timberwolves’ Naz Reid).

At small forward, Andrew Wiggins is a rug that ties the lineup together. It took only 17 games for Heat fans to get familiar with the Wiggins experience — maddeningly silent one game, Maple Jordan the next. Wiggins scored 30 and 42 points in back-to-back games in a Heat uniform, then didn’t score more than 16 for the rest of the season. Relying on Wiggins as a second or third scoring option is risky business. He’s better as a fourth option who occasionally moonlights as a No. 1 or 2. In acting terms, he’s capable of filling the background but primed to dominate a scene.

BACKCOURT

Fortunately, the Heat no longer need Wiggins to play a featured offensive role. Norman Powell, whom the Heat acquired from the Los Angeles Clippers in a three-team deal for Kyle Anderson and Kevin Love, shuffles the pecking order. Powell is a proven scorer and one of the sweetest-shooting guards in the league. Lining him up next to Tyler Herro gives the Heat one of the best shooting backcourts in the league.

You may have noticed that we’re five players into the starting lineup and there’s been no mention of a point guard. The Heat will likely start the season trying to play point guard by committee.

Between Herro, Powell and Wiggins, the Heat have three players who have logged plenty of pick-and-roll reps. Adebayo can also trigger actions with dribble handoffs or out of the post.

If that doesn’t work, Spoelstra could elevate Davion Mitchell into the starting lineup. Mitchell is a benevolent table-setter and point-of-attack defender who should log something close to starter minutes even if he’s not part of the first five. Don’t be surprised if he’s part of Miami’s closing lineup, alongside Herro, Powell, Wiggins and Adebayo.

Terry Rozier remains on the roster, but his role is in question after playing himself out of the rotation. It will take quite the turnaround to work his way back into Spoelstra’s good graces. The

////
97.1

That was Miami’s pace last season, ranking the Heat as the fourth-slowest team in the league. Miami has never ranked higher than 27th in pace since acquiring Jimmy Butler in 2019.

This roster could benefit from playing a more up-tempo style, and the Heat should aim to be a top-10 team in pace this season.



Norman Powell ////

OFFSEASON
MOVES

DRAFT PICK

1 KASPARAS JAKUČIONIS
G, 6-5, 205, Illinois

Jakučionis is a talented passer and finisher. He’s prone to careless turnovers, but there’s no questioning his feel for the game.

OTHER NEWCOMERS

The Heat signed center Vladislav Goldin after he had gone undrafted in June and immediately gave him a two-way contract. They like his size, physicality and effort. Simone Fontecchio, acquired in a sign-and-trade with the Detroit Pistons, is a career 36% 3-point shooter who, at 6-foot-7, provides size and spacing off the bench. The Heat also acquired Norman Powell, who was considered for an All-Star spot in the Western Conference last season, as part of a three-team deal. He’s a massive roster upgrade for a minimal cost.

ROSTER																	48-MINUTE		
HEAD COACH: ERIK SPOELSTRA (18TH SEASON; CAREER: 787-572)																	PRODUCTIVITY		
#	PLAYER	POS	HT	WT	DOB	FROM	YRS	G	MPG	FG%	3P%	FT%	RPG	APG	PPG		REB	AST	PTS
14	Tyler Herro	G	6-5	195	1/20/00	Kentucky	6	77	35.4	.472	.375	.878	5.2	5.5	23.9		7.0	7.5	32.4
24	Norman Powell	G	6-4	215	5/25/93	UCLA	10	60	32.6	.484	.418	.804	3.2	2.1	21.8		4.7	3.1	32.0
13	Bam Adebayo	C/F	6-9	255	7/18/97	Kentucky	8	78	34.3	.485	.357	.765	9.6	4.3	18.1		13.4	6.1	25.3
22	Andrew Wiggins	F	6-7	197	2/23/95	Kansas	11	60	30.7	.448	.374	.763	4.5	2.6	18.0		7.0	4.1	28.1
5	Nikola Jović	F	6-10	205	6/09/03	Mega Basket	3	46	25.1	.456	.371	.828	3.9	2.8	10.7		7.5	5.4	20.5
2	Terry Rozier	G	6-1	190	3/17/94	Louisville	10	64	25.9	.391	.295	.852	3.7	2.6	10.6		6.9	4.8	19.7
7	Kel’el Ware	C	7-0	230	4/20/04	Indiana	1	64	22.2	.554	.315	.687	7.4	0.9	9.3		16.0	2.0	20.1
11	Jaime Jaquez Jr.	G	6-6	225	2/18/01	UCLA	2	66	20.7	.461	.311	.754	4.4	2.5	8.6		10.2	5.8	20.0
45	Davion Mitchell	G	6-0	202	9/05/98	Baylor	4	74	27.4	.468	.398	.690	2.3	4.9	7.9		4.0	8.6	13.9
12	Dru Smith	G	6-2	203	12/30/97	Missouri	3	14	19.2	.508	.533	.750	2.6	1.6	6.2		6.4	4.1	15.6
0	Simone Fontecchio	F	6-7	209	12/09/95	Baskonia	3	75	16.5	.402	.335	.833	2.9	0.9	5.9		8.3	2.5	17.3
9	Pelle Larsson	G	6-5	215	2/23/01	Arizona	1	55	14.2	.438	.337	.672	1.7	1.2	4.6		5.6	4.0	15.4
16	Keshad Johnson	F	6-7	225	6/23/01	Arizona	1	16	6.1	.692	.429	.444	1.8	0.3	2.7		13.7	2.0	21.0
	Myron Gardner	F	6-6	220	5/21/01	Arkansas-Little Rock				R — First NBA Season									
50	Vladislav Goldin	C	7-0	250	5/12/01	Michigan				R — First NBA Season									
25	Kasparas Jakučionis	G	6-5	205	5/29/06	Illinois				R — First NBA Season									

GARY A. VASQUEZ-IMAGN IMAGES



ANDREW WIGGINS

Heat also re-signed Dru Smith. If he can make a full recovery from the torn Achilles he sustained in December, he could carve out playing time. Four of the seven or eight players in the mix for playing time off the bench are on rookie contracts, eager to make something of themselves. Jaime Jaquez Jr. is hoping to rebound from a second-year slump. Pelle Larsson is a 2024 second-round pick who somehow finds himself on the court for critical moments. The team’s 2025 first-round pick, Kasparas Jakucionis, has a ton of playmaking talent but needs to tame the careless turnovers.

FINAL ANALYSIS

While there’s no true superstar on the roster, the Heat are flush with length, shooting and multi-skilled athletes. Spoelstra will scheme up ways to use this to his advantage. Expect to hear the word “unpredictable” quite a bit this preseason when players and coaches talk about the offense. The same goes for the defense. The Heat have the personnel to deploy multiple looks: drop, switch everything and zone. Spoelstra isn’t afraid to drill his team on multiple schemes and toggle between them. After the Heat won 37 games last season, they had an offseason over/under of 38.5. That number overlooks Miami’s talent, coaching and culture. Setting aside last year’s Butler-torpedoed season, it’s been 10 years since the Heat failed to reach 39 wins in a regular season. Dollars to donuts, that over/under will be used as bulletin board material. The Heat are exactly where they want to be — overlooked and underestimated. Butler’s departure closed the championship window for now, but it opened the door to a new era. Adebayo (28) and Herro (25) are still young and smack in the middle of their primes, and they have a chance to steer the franchise in a new direction.

2025-26 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 22	at Orlando	7:00
Oct. 24	at Memphis	8:00
Oct. 26	New York	6:00
Oct. 28	Charlotte	7:30
Oct. 30	at San Antonio	8:30

NOVEMBER

Nov. 2	at L.A. Lakers	9:30
Nov. 3	at L.A. Clippers	10:30
Nov. 5	at Denver	9:00
Nov. 7	Charlotte*	8:00
Nov. 8	Portland	8:00
Nov. 10	Cleveland	7:30
Nov. 12	Cleveland	7:30
Nov. 14	at New York*	7:00
Nov. 17	New York	7:30
Nov. 19	Golden State	7:00
Nov. 21	at Chicago*	8:00
Nov. 23	at Philadelphia	1:00
Nov. 24	Dallas	7:30
Nov. 26	Milwaukee*	7:30
Nov. 29	Detroit	8:00

DECEMBER

Dec. 1	L.A. Clippers	7:30
Dec. 3	at Dallas	8:30
Dec. 5	at Orlando	7:00
Dec. 6	Sacramento	8:00
Dec. 9, 10	Emirates NBA Cup Quarterfinals	
Dec. 13	Emirates NBA Cup Semifinals	
Dec. 16	Emirates NBA Cup Championship	
Dec. 18	at Brooklyn	7:30

Dec. 19	at Boston	7:00
Dec. 21	at New York	6:00
Dec. 23	Toronto	7:30
Dec. 26	at Atlanta	7:00
Dec. 27	Indiana	8:00
Dec. 29	Denver	7:30

JANUARY

Jan. 1	at Detroit	7:00
Jan. 3	Minnesota	5:00
Jan. 4	New Orleans	6:00
Jan. 6	at Minnesota	8:00
Jan. 8	at Chicago	8:00
Jan. 10	at Indiana	7:00
Jan. 11	at Oklahoma City	7:00
Jan. 13	Phoenix	7:30
Jan. 15	Boston	7:30
Jan. 17	Oklahoma City	8:00
Jan. 19	at Golden State	10:00
Jan. 20	at Sacramento	10:00
Jan. 22	at Portland	10:00
Jan. 24	at Utah	9:30
Jan. 25	at Phoenix	8:00
Jan. 28	Orlando	7:30
Jan. 30	Chicago	8:00

FEBRUARY

Feb. 1	Chicago	6:00
Feb. 3	Atlanta	7:30
Feb. 6	at Boston	7:30
Feb. 8	at Washington	2:00
Feb. 9	Utah	7:30
Feb. 11	at New Orleans	8:00

Feb. 20	at Atlanta	7:30
Feb. 21	Memphis	8:00
Feb. 24	at Milwaukee	8:00
Feb. 26	at Philadelphia	7:00
Feb. 28	Houston	3:00

MARCH

March 3	Brooklyn	7:30
March 5	Brooklyn	7:30
March 6	at Charlotte	7:00
March 8	Detroit	6:00
March 10	Washington	7:30
March 12	Milwaukee	7:30
March 14	Orlando	8:00
March 17	at Charlotte	7:00
March 19	L.A. Lakers	8:00
March 21	at Houston	8:00
March 23	San Antonio	7:30
March 25	at Cleveland	7:30
March 27	at Cleveland	7:30
March 29	at Indiana	5:00
March 30	Philadelphia	7:00

APRIL

April 1	Boston	7:30
April 4	Washington	3:00
April 7	at Toronto	7:30
April 9	at Toronto	7:00
April 10	at Washington	7:00
April 12	Atlanta	6:00

*Emirates NBA Cup regular-season game
All times Eastern



MAGIC

SOUTHEAST DIVISION PREDICTION: 1ST

The Magic finished last season at 41-41, sneaking into the playoffs but falling in the first round for the second straight year, this time to the Boston Celtics. Injuries to key players early on held the Magic back — Paolo Banchero missed 36 games, Franz Wagner sat for 22 and starting guard Jalen Suggs missed nearly half the year and all of the postseason.

Despite those setbacks, Orlando led the NBA in defensive efficiency, a hallmark of head coach Jamahl Mosley's style in his fifth year at the helm. Mosley's approach blends accountability with freedom — demanding constant effort and communication on defense while allowing his best playmakers to make reads and improvise within the offense. His teams defend with purpose, pressure the ball and rotate as a unit.

The question for 2025-26 is whether the Magic can add enough firepower to push deeper in the Eastern Conference. To address a glaring weakness from last season — outside shooting — they swung a deal to acquire Desmond Bane, a proven scorer and three-level threat, in exchange for Kentavious Caldwell-Pope, Cole Anthony, four unprotected first-round picks (2026, 2028, 2030 and the 16th pick in the 2025 draft) and a first-round pick swap in 2029.

With Banchero still ascending, Wagner growing into a star and Suggs healthy, the Magic have a core that can score and defend at a high level. If Bane delivers from beyond the arc and Suggs stays on the floor, Orlando's blend of stingy defense and improved offense could make it a dangerous dark horse in the Eastern Conference.

FRONTCOURT

Banchero, who is evolving into one of the league's most versatile forwards, anchors the frontcourt. His ability to score in isolation, finish at the rim and create matchup problems with his size and skill is rare for a player still so young. The next step in his progression is becoming a more consistent 3-point threat, which would force defenses to pick their poison between closing out hard or giving him room to attack off the dribble.

Wagner, who is slightly undersized but highly skilled, complements Banchero with length, perimeter shooting and defensive agility. Wagner's off-ball cutting and knack for finding space in transition make him a consistent scoring option even when he's not the primary focus.

Center Wendell Carter Jr. provides a sturdy presence inside; he's able to protect the rim, box out physically and run the floor in transition. Carter's high screen-and-roll chemistry with both Suggs and

SCOUTING THE MAGIC

ANONYMOUS TAKES FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

"Adding Desmond Bane looks like a great move for them on paper. ... They still could use even more outside shooting, but Bane at least gives them a reliable threat. ... Paolo Banchero is quickly turning into a major force, and Franz Wagner is right there with him, though I think Wagner may have reached his ceiling. ... Their defense is already elite and can be downright scary at times. ... Jalen Suggs staying healthy is a huge factor because their defense is that much better when he's on the floor. ... This is a big, physical team, but backcourt depth could become a real issue, especially if Suggs can't stay out there."



PAOLO BANCHERO

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Record: 21-51	Record: 22-60	Record: 34-48	Record: 47-35	Record: 41-41
Division: 5th	Division: 5th	Division: 3rd	Division: 1st	Division: 1st

FROM LEFT: SAM SHARPE-IMAGN IMAGES; MIKE WATERS-IMAGN IMAGES



BEYOND THE ARC

DEFENSE WINS GAMES The Magic's league-leading defense wasn't a fluke. Head coach Jamahl Mosley's system emphasizes effort, communication, versatility and other buzzwords. Expect Orlando to remain one of the toughest teams to score on, especially if key players stay healthy.

BANE'S BIG STAGE Desmond Bane arrives with a reputation as one of the league's most reliable three-level scorers. How quickly he adapts to Mosley's defense-first style will be a storyline to watch this season.

SUGGS' HEALTH Jalen Suggs missed half of last season and the entire playoffs. When he's on the court, he's arguably the best perimeter defender in the NBA. His availability could define Orlando's ceiling.

YOUNG WINGS RISING Tristan Da Silva, Jett Howard and Anthony Black all flashed potential last year. If any one of them takes a leap, the Magic's wing depth could become a surprise strength.

HOPE FOR RICHARDSON First-round pick Jase Richardson enters training camp ready to battle for minutes in a crowded backcourt. His shooting and smarts could make him a factor in rotation battles early on.



FRANZ WAGNER

Banchero allows the Magic to keep their offensive structure intact regardless of which creator has the ball.

Depth behind the starters features a mix of physicality and versatility. Moritz Wagner offers energy and a tough edge on defense, while Jonathan Isaac, when healthy, can guard multiple frontcourt spots and stretch the floor with his shooting. Isaac’s ability to switch on the perimeter makes him a key weapon against the East’s bigger wings. Goga Bitadze remains a capable big man who can spell Carter and contribute inside scoring and rebounding.

This frontcourt combination blends youth, athleticism and defensive toughness. The question is whether the rotation can stay healthy and consistent enough to maintain the Magic’s league-best defense over 82 games. Against top Eastern Conference contenders, Orlando will need Banchero and Wagner to be two-way forces while the bench bigs match the physicality of elite playoff frontcourts.

BACKCOURT

The backcourt now centers around Suggs and Bane, a pairing that blends defense, scoring and poise. Suggs is one of the best perimeter defenders in the league, with the ability to pressure ball-handlers, fight through screens and disrupt passing lanes. Offensively, he has improved as a spot-up shooter and secondary creator, giving the Magic more lineup flexibility.

Bane’s arrival is about more than just shooting. His movement without the ball forces defenses to chase, opening gaps for drives from Banchero and Wagner. He can also handle pick-and-roll duties, giving Suggs more opportunities to attack off the catch. Against teams that pack the paint, Bane’s presence should keep Orlando’s spacing intact, forcing rotations that make the offense less predictable.

Behind them, new arrival Tyus Jones brings steady, veteran point guard leadership. He can initiate the offense without turning the ball over, manage pace and help close games when the pressure is on. Young wings Tristan Da Silva, Jett Howard and Anthony Black each flashed promise

41.8

Orlando averaged 41.8 rebounds per game last season, ranking 27th in the league. For a team with size and length up front, this is a glaring weakness. Improving rebounding will be key to sustaining the Magic’s defensive identity and could be an underrated factor in how far they can go.



Desmond Bane

OFFSEASON MOVES

DRAFT PICKS

1 JASE RICHARDSON
G, 6-0, 180, Michigan State

2 NOAH PENDA
G/F, 6-6, 215, France

Richardson is a smooth shooter with good quickness. His size may be a challenge for the shooting guard spot, but he should help fill the void left by Cole Anthony’s departure. Penda, the No. 32 overall pick, is considered a project with promising upside. Penda’s physicality and feel for the game could eventually help in the frontcourt, but he is unlikely to see significant minutes unless injuries open a door.

OTHER NEWCOMERS

Desmond Bane and Tyus Jones join the Magic to bolster scoring and stability in the backcourt. Bane’s proven three-level scoring addresses a major weakness from last season, while Jones provides steady veteran leadership and playmaking off the bench.

ROSTER																48-MINUTE		
HEAD COACH: JAMAHL MOSLEY (5TH SEASON; CAREER: 144-184)																PRODUCTIVITY		
#	PLAYER	POS	HT	WT	DOB	FROM	YRS	G	MPG	FG%	3P%	FT%	RPG	APG	PPG	REB	AST	PTS
5	Paolo Banchero	F	6-10	250	11/12/02	Duke	3	46	34.4	.452	.320	.727	7.5	4.8	25.9	10.5	6.6	36.1
22	Franz Wagner	F	6-10	220	8/27/01	Michigan	4	60	33.7	.463	.295	.871	5.7	4.7	24.2	8.1	6.7	34.4
3	Desmond Bane	G	6-5	215	6/25/98	TCU	5	69	32.0	.484	.392	.894	6.1	5.3	19.2	9.1	8.0	28.9
4	Jalen Suggs	G	6-5	205	6/03/01	Gonzaga	4	35	28.6	.410	.314	.882	4.0	3.7	16.2	6.8	6.2	27.1
21	Moritz Wagner	F/C	6-11	245	4/26/97	Michigan	7	30	18.8	.562	.360	.718	4.9	1.4	12.9	12.6	3.6	32.8
2	Tyus Jones	G	6-1	196	5/10/96	Duke	10	81	26.8	.448	.414	.895	2.4	5.3	10.2	4.3	9.5	18.3
0	Anthony Black	G	6-7	200	1/20/04	Arkansas	2	78	24.2	.423	.318	.761	2.9	3.1	9.4	5.9	6.1	18.7
34	Wendell Carter Jr.	C/F	6-10	270	4/16/99	Duke	7	68	25.9	.460	.234	.737	7.2	2.0	9.1	13.4	3.7	16.9
23	Tristan da Silva	F	6-8	217	5/15/01	Colorado	1	74	22.0	.412	.335	.873	3.3	1.5	7.2	7.2	3.3	15.7
35	Goga Bitadze	C/F	6-10	250	7/20/99	Mega Basket	6	70	20.4	.611	.107	.639	6.6	2.0	7.2	15.5	4.6	16.9
21	Orlando Robinson	C	6-10	235	7/10/00	Fresno State	3	44	17.5	.444	.327	.771	5.0	1.8	6.9	13.7	4.8	18.9
1	Jonathan Isaac	F	6-10	230	10/03/97	Florida State	6	71	15.4	.414	.258	.682	4.4	0.6	5.4	13.8	1.8	16.7
8	Jamal Cain	F	6-6	191	3/20/99	Oakland	3	37	13.6	.430	.325	.680	2.3	0.6	5.3	8.1	2.1	18.7
13	Jett Howard	G	6-6	215	9/14/03	Michigan	2	60	11.7	.374	.296	.696	1.2	0.7	4.5	4.8	3.0	18.3
8	Mac McClung	G	6-2	185	1/06/99	Texas Tech	3	2	5.1	.000	.000	.000	0.5	1.5	0.0	4.7	14.1	0.0
93	Noah Penda	G/F	6-6	215	1/07/05	Le Mans Sarthe												
11	Jase Richardson	G	6-0	180	10/16/05	Michigan State												
								R — First NBA Season										
								R — First NBA Season										

MATTHEW SMITH-IMAGN IMAGES



JALEN SUGGS

last season and will compete for meaningful minutes, giving Mosley multiple options to mix size, shooting and defense.

First-round pick Jase Richardson enters training camp ready to battle for backcourt time. His ability to shoot off the dribble and his quickness could earn him an early rotation role if he can defend consistently. Lineup battles here will be fierce — Jones’ stability, Richardson’s shooting and the upside of Orlando’s young wings give Mosley flexibility he has not had in previous years.

FINAL ANALYSIS

The Magic have built one of the league’s top defenses and now look equipped to add the offensive balance they lacked last season. Banchero and Wagner are rising stars capable of dominating games on both ends of the floor. Suggs and Bane give the backcourt a blend of lockdown defense and efficient scoring that can dictate the pace.

If Orlando can keep its key players healthy, especially Suggs and Isaac, this group should improve on last year’s 41-win baseline. Mosley’s system rewards effort and discipline, which means they will remain competitive every night.

Against the Eastern Conference’s elite, the Magic will lean on their size, depth and defensive identity, but their fate may hinge on whether Bane’s shooting fully unlocks the offense.

The East is wide open, and Orlando’s combination of defensive grit and improved perimeter scoring gives the Magic a chance to rise from playoff participant to genuine contender. In a conference without a clear juggernaut, the Magic’s next step is no longer about proving they belong — it’s about proving they can win when it matters most.

2025-26 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 22	Miami	7:00
Oct. 24	Atlanta	7:00
Oct. 25	Chicago	7:00
Oct. 27	at Philadelphia	7:00
Oct. 29	at Detroit	7:00
Oct. 30	at Charlotte	7:00

NOVEMBER

Nov. 1	at Washington	7:00
Nov. 4	at Atlanta	8:00
Nov. 7	Boston*	7:00
Nov. 9	Boston	6:00
Nov. 10	Portland	7:00
Nov. 12	at New York	7:00
Nov. 14	Brooklyn*	7:00
Nov. 16	at Houston	7:00
Nov. 18	Golden State	7:00
Nov. 20	L.A. Clippers	7:00
Nov. 22	New York	5:00
Nov. 23	at Boston	6:00
Nov. 25	at Philadelphia*	8:00
Nov. 28	at Detroit*	7:30

DECEMBER

Dec. 1	Chicago	7:30
Dec. 3	San Antonio	7:00
Dec. 5	Miami	7:00
Dec. 7	at New York	12:00
Dec. 9, 10	Emirates NBA Cup Quarterfinals	
Dec. 13	Emirates NBA Cup Semifinals	
Dec. 16	Emirates NBA Cup Championship	
Dec. 18	at Denver	9:00

Dec. 20	at Utah	9:30
Dec. 22	at Golden State	10:00
Dec. 23	at Portland	10:00
Dec. 26	Charlotte	7:00
Dec. 27	Denver	7:00
Dec. 29	at Toronto	7:30
Dec. 31	at Indiana	3:00

JANUARY

Jan. 2	at Chicago	8:00
Jan. 4	Indiana	3:00
Jan. 6	at Washington	7:00
Jan. 7	at Brooklyn	7:30
Jan. 9	Philadelphia	7:00
Jan. 11	New Orleans	3:00
Jan. 15	Memphis	2:00
Jan. 18	Memphis	12:00
Jan. 22	Charlotte	7:00
Jan. 24	Cleveland	7:00
Jan. 26	at Cleveland	7:00
Jan. 28	at Miami	7:30
Jan. 30	Toronto	7:00

FEBRUARY

Feb. 1	at San Antonio	4:00
Feb. 3	at Oklahoma City	8:00
Feb. 5	Brooklyn	7:00
Feb. 7	Utah	7:00
Feb. 9	Milwaukee	7:30
Feb. 11	Milwaukee	7:00
Feb. 19	at Sacramento	10:00
Feb. 21	at Phoenix	5:00
Feb. 22	at L.A. Clippers	9:00

Feb. 24	at L.A. Lakers	10:30
Feb. 26	Houston	7:30

MARCH

March 1	Detroit	6:00
March 3	Washington	7:00
March 5	Dallas	7:00
March 7	at Minnesota	3:00
March 8	at Milwaukee	8:00
March 11	Cleveland	7:30
March 12	Washington	7:00
March 14	at Miami	8:00
March 16	at Atlanta	7:00
March 17	Oklahoma City	7:00
March 19	at Charlotte	7:00
March 21	L.A. Lakers	7:00
March 23	Indiana	7:00
March 24	at Cleveland	8:00
March 26	Sacramento	7:00
March 29	at Toronto	6:00
March 31	Phoenix	7:00

APRIL

April 1	Atlanta	7:30
April 3	at Dallas	8:30
April 5	at New Orleans	7:00
April 6	Detroit	7:00
April 8	Minnesota	7:00
April 10	at Chicago	8:00
April 12	at Boston	6:00

*Emirates NBA Cup regular-season game
All times Eastern



WAS WIZARDS

SOUTHEAST DIVISION PREDICTION: **5TH**

The Washington Wizards enter the 2025-26 season in Year 3 of their rebuild under team president Michael Winger and general manager Will Dawkins. Not surprisingly, the youth movement and financial flexibility they're pursuing mirrors what the Oklahoma City Thunder started years ago under GM Sam Presti, whom Winger, Dawkins and even head coach Brian Keefe worked under at various points.

Despite an unlucky result in the 2025 NBA Draft lottery, this team boasts multiple potential franchise cornerstone talents, and the Wizards will almost certainly be near the top of the lottery odds to retain their top-eight protected draft pick in 2026. Keefe enters his second full season as head coach, and once again, he will be graded primarily on his ability to develop Washington's abundance of young talent, and not on wins and losses.

After the upcoming season, there will be renewed pressure from ownership to win, meaning that Keefe will be keenly scrutinized this season to gauge whether or not he is the head coach to mold the young talent and help the Wizards contend in the future.

FRONTCOURT

As currently constructed, Washington's frontcourt depth is rather limited. Marvin Bagley III returns after a brief stint with the Memphis Grizzlies and will need to eat playing time at the center position, even though it will be off the bench. Bagley's veteran's minimum contract allowed the team to waive Richaun Holmes before his \$13 million contract kicked in.

The team evidently has high hopes for 2024 No. 2 overall pick Alex Sarr to play center almost exclusively after questioning whether he was better suited for power forward. The 7-footer looked weak at times last season trying to hold up against elite centers like Nikola Jokić and Joel Embiid, but the weight room has been a point of emphasis as he continues to grow into his 20-year-old body. Sarr's offense is also still a work in progress, but Washington will need him to be a deterrent at the rim and an effective defensive rebounder. The Wizards will struggle on the glass, especially with their relatively small-ball power forwards.

Washington's forward rotation will be led by 34-year-old Khris Middleton, who did not display efficient shooting in his small sample of games for the Wizards last season. After exercising his \$33.3 million player option, the Wizards will showcase him in the first half of the season in hopes of moving the 2021 NBA champion to a contender and acquiring future assets.

SCOUTING THE WIZARDS

ANONYMOUS TAKES
FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

"They haven't hit 50 wins in a season since 1978-79. Coincidentally, that was the last time they reached the Finals. ... They're not reaching 50 wins this year, either. ... Their best bet is to hope for the No. 1 or 2 pick next year. ... They have a lot of young guys, but I'm not sure any are the type of players you build around, other than maybe Alex Sarr. ... I'm not saying Bilal Coulibaly and Bub Carrington are bad. I just don't see their ceilings being anything more than top reserves on winning teams. ... How long are CJ McCollum and Khris Middleton gonna want to stick around? ... I'd probably try to trade for an aging star. No one pays any attention to them now."



BILAL
COULIBALY

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Record: 34-38	Record: 35-47	Record: 35-47	Record: 15-67	Record: 18-64
Division: 3rd	Division: 4th	Division: 3rd	Division: 5th	Division: 5th



ALEX SARR

BEYOND THE ARC

BACKCOURT PAIRING In early July prior to Summer League, Bub Carrington and Tre Johnson were already partaking in a friendly rivalry. Johnson crashed one of Carrington's post-practice media availabilities to ask for comment on who was currently winning in their deep shooting competition. Depending on whom you ask, you will get a different answer.

REUNION When Washington acquired CJ McCollum, it meant reuniting him with assistant coach David Vanterpool, who worked closely with McCollum for the first six seasons of his NBA career when both were with the Portland Trail Blazers. Vanterpool has received a lot of praise from McCollum and his former running mate Damian Lillard throughout their careers, and even though McCollum is in a different phase of his journey now, the two are thrilled to be reunited.

HAMSTRUNG NO MORE After a hamstring injury ended Bilal Coulibaly's second season, the defensive menace nicknamed Bilalcatraz is eager to take a jump in Year 3, a key season for showing his worth before contract extension negotiations next summer. Coulibaly was set to represent France in FIBA EuroBasket 2025 along with Wizards teammate Alex Sarr.

DMV HOMECOMING Cam Whitmore has the opportunity to spread his wings with more playing time for his hometown team. Growing up watching John Wall and Bradley Beal in the playoffs, Whitmore is eager to help the Wizards turn things around so that fans get excited about the team again.

Justin Champagnie is the only other possible rotation player to fit the traditional forward archetype, but if the roster is healthy, he will probably be out of the rotation in favor of his wing teammates. Despite his 6-foot-6 height, Champagnie was tied for fourth on the team in rebounds per game last season at 5.7 behind significantly taller players, so the Pitt product can help address a serious weakness.

The Wizards' wings can play a variety of positions but are often referred to as big guards within the organization. Bilal Coulibaly will look to take a leap offensively after shooting 28% from 3-point range last season. A hard worker in the lab, Coulibaly will make a jump with more moves and countermoves added to his repertoire.

Kyshawn George, the last of the Wizards' three draft picks in 2024, has flashed into one of Washington's most well-rounded players. He is an engaged defender and is able to score from a variety of spots while also getting others involved.

Newly acquired Cam Whitmore could range anywhere from an odd man out in the rotation to demanding top-seven minutes given his unique skill set. Playing time was hard to get for the 21-year-old on the win-now Houston Rockets roster, but he has a proven prowess in getting to the rim, where he shot 69% last season.

Despite signing a four-year, \$54 million contract extension last October, Corey Kispert could be on the move before the trade deadline for a contender that is looking for outside shooting. The Gonzaga product is a high-IQ player and moves well without the ball, but his defense leaves much to be desired.

Washington's more traditional guards have a lot of potential and more playing time available after the team agreed to a contract buyout with Marcus Smart. The team will likely shop CJ McCollum's expiring contract, but for however long he is on the Wizards, he will provide valuable veteran mentorship. The 34-year-old will have the ball in his



CJ McCollum

OFFSEASON MOVES

DRAFT PICKS

1 TRE JOHNSON

SG, 6-5, 190, Texas

1 WILL RILEY

SF, 6-8, 180, Illinois

2 JAMIR WATKINS

SF, 6-7, 210, Florida State

Even though the Wizards missed out on Cooper Flagg, they are understandably happy with how they made out with a potential long-term 20-point scorer in Johnson. Riley did not have a high usage off the bench as a freshman in college but flashed the ability to score at multiple levels. Watkins is a ferocious defender who will make everyone better in practice.

OTHER NEWCOMERS

The Wizards traded Jordan Poole for CJ McCollum, who will fill the role of veteran leader with an added bonus of financial flexibility. Washington is taking fliers on Cam Whitmore, Dillon Jones and Malaki Branham.

11

The Wizards currently have 11 players 22 years old or younger on their 17-man roster including two-way players (one vacant spot at press time). Even though veterans like CJ McCollum and Khriston Middleton will play heavily to start the season, the youth movement is in full effect in D.C.

[illegible]



KHRIS MIDDLETON

hands less frequently, but he would like to extend his active 10-season streak as a 20-plus-point scorer.

All signs point to Bub Carrington starting at point guard, which will be accompanied by some growing pains, but now is the time to see if he will be able to carry that torch for years to come. Carrington has been commended for the amount of time he has spent at the Wizards’ practice facility this offseason as he continues earning the trust of the organization.

Rookie Tre Johnson is creating huge excitement for his lethal shooting from all ranges, including NBA 3-point distance that was no trouble for him in college. The Texas product lives and breathes basketball with no outside hobbies, and with McCollum as a perfect teacher for him, the sky is the limit for Johnson. That said, the NBA is an adjustment for any rookie, and with a crowded wing rotation, Washington should ease Johnson in even if he would rather jump into the deep end.

Despite elite athleticism, AJ Johnson is another player on the outside looking in at the rotation, but things can change quickly with injuries or outworking teammates in practice.

FINAL ANALYSIS

For the third consecutive season, the Wizards will find themselves at the bottom of the standings and unlikely to surpass the 20-win mark with so many young players taking on large roles. The few veterans on the team (Middleton, McCollum and Kispert) will be traded if they can fetch first-round picks, possibly even requiring taking back bad contracts. The 2026 draft class is loaded with Darryn Peterson, AJ Dybantsa and Cam Boozer, so Washington will strategically ensure strong lottery odds to keep their top-eight protected draft pick.

2025-26 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 22	at Milwaukee	8:00
Oct. 24	at Dallas	8:30
Oct. 26	Charlotte	6:00
Oct. 28	Philadelphia	7:00
Oct. 30	at Oklahoma City	8:00

NOVEMBER

Nov. 1	Orlando	7:00
Nov. 3	at New York	7:30
Nov. 5	at Boston	7:30
Nov. 7	Cleveland*	7:00
Nov. 8	Dallas	7:00
Nov. 10	at Detroit	7:00
Nov. 12	at Houston	8:00
Nov. 16	Brooklyn	6:00
Nov. 19	at Minnesota	8:00
Nov. 21	at Toronto*	7:30
Nov. 22	at Chicago	8:00
Nov. 25	Atlanta*	7:00
Nov. 28	at Indiana*	7:30

DECEMBER

Dec. 1	Milwaukee	7:00
Dec. 2	at Philadelphia	7:00
Dec. 4	Boston	7:00
Dec. 6	Atlanta	7:00
Dec. 9, 10	Emirates NBA Cup Quarterfinals	
Dec. 13	Emirates NBA Cup Semifinals	
Dec. 16	Emirates NBA Cup Championship	
Dec. 17	at San Antonio	8:00
Dec. 20	at Memphis	8:00
Dec. 21	San Antonio	7:00

Dec. 23	at Charlotte	7:00
Dec. 26	Toronto	7:00
Dec. 28	Memphis	6:00
Dec. 29	Phoenix	7:00
Dec. 31	at Milwaukee	8:00

JANUARY

Jan. 2	Brooklyn	7:00
Jan. 4	Minnesota	6:00
Jan. 6	Orlando	7:00
Jan. 7	at Philadelphia	7:00
Jan. 9	New Orleans	7:00
Jan. 11	at Phoenix	8:00
Jan. 14	at L.A. Clippers	10:30
Jan. 16	at Sacramento	10:00
Jan. 17	at Denver	9:00
Jan. 19	L.A. Clippers	3:00
Jan. 22	Denver	7:00
Jan. 24	at Charlotte	6:00
Jan. 27	Portland	7:00
Jan. 29	Milwaukee	7:00
Jan. 30	L.A. Lakers	7:00

FEBRUARY

Feb. 1	Sacramento	6:00
Feb. 3	New York	7:00
Feb. 5	at Detroit	7:00
Feb. 7	at Brooklyn	3:00
Feb. 8	Miami	2:00
Feb. 11	at Cleveland	7:00
Feb. 19	Indiana	7:00
Feb. 20	Indiana	7:00
Feb. 22	Charlotte	6:00

Feb. 24	at Atlanta	7:30
Feb. 26	at Atlanta	7:30
Feb. 28	Toronto	7:00

MARCH

March 2	Houston	7:00
March 3	at Orlando	7:00
March 5	Utah	7:00
March 8	at New Orleans	7:00
March 10	at Miami	7:30
March 12	at Orlando	7:00
March 14	at Boston	6:00
March 16	Golden State	7:00
March 17	Detroit	7:00
March 19	Detroit	7:00
March 21	Oklahoma City	5:00
March 22	at New York	7:30
March 25	at Utah	9:00
March 27	at Golden State	10:00
March 29	at Portland	6:00
March 30	at L.A. Lakers	10:00

APRIL

April 1	Philadelphia	7:00
April 4	at Miami	3:00
April 5	at Brooklyn	3:30
April 7	Chicago	7:00
April 9	Chicago	7:00
April 10	Miami	7:00
April 12	at Cleveland	6:00

**Emirates NBA Cup regular-season game
All times Eastern*



DALLAS MAVERICKS

SOUTHWEST DIVISION PREDICTION: **3RD**

The Mavericks have undergone a chaotic sea change. Two years ago, they made the NBA Finals. Last year, they looked like they had a chance to win the title during the beginning of the season, showing flashes of excellence before a Luka Dončić injury on Christmas.

Then came a shocking trade that sent Dončić to the Los Angeles Lakers. Disaster shortly followed. Dallas failed to make the playoffs after losing Kyrie Irving to a devastating ACL injury late in the season and missing newcomer Anthony Davis as well.

That lost season turned out to be a blessing in disguise. The team cashed in on its 1.8% odds to win the No. 1 pick in the draft and add ready-made star Cooper Flagg. He represents a get-out-of-jail-free card for a franchise that looked like it was in serious trouble.

This year, expectations should be tempered. Irving is going to be missing most, if not all, of this season, and the Mavericks were already light on advantage creation before his injury.

Flagg is the youngest player in his draft class, and he will be tested immediately. The team needs him to be able to create for himself and others. Dallas has another star in Davis, along with a ton of good role players, to assist him. The competition is going to be fierce in the Western Conference, though.

The Mavericks have a huge team. Flagg, a natural forward, will probably log some minutes at shooting guard in some jumbo bench lineups. That odd roster balance, stacked with several starter-level centers but lacking elite guard play, is going to make this a tricky fit for head coach Jason Kidd. With so many challenges, Dallas will need a lot to break right in order to compete for a good seed in the playoffs.

FRONTCOURT

The Mavericks have one of the deepest and best frontcourts in the league. Davis is an All-Defensive talent whose versatility and shot-blocking should hold that unit together. Dereck Lively II and Daniel Gafford are athletic rim protectors who can both get up and finish lobbs with authority. All three are going to mash opponents on the offensive glass.

Lively has shown flashes of a developing 3-pointer, and Davis is good for one per game. Shooting is a weakness at the position, though.

Flagg is also going to be challenged as a shooter. He nailed 38.5% of his looks from beyond the arc at Duke, but he must prove that he can hit from the deeper NBA 3-point line. Opponents are going to

SCOUTING THE MAVS

ANONYMOUS TAKES FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

"There are so many questions with this team. Can Anthony Davis stay on the court? When will Kyrie Irving be back? Will Cooper Flagg offer much right away? ... I know when there are a lot of unanswered questions about our team going into the season, I don't feel great about things. ... But if it all comes together, yeah, they could really have something. ... No matter, you have to question how things are being run here. Trading Luka Dončić was the idea of a madman. I can't trust that this regime will make the right decisions. ... Klay Thompson shouldn't be your starting two guard at this stage. And I say that as someone who was surprised by him last season."



KYRIE IRVING

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Record: 42-30	Record: 52-30	Record: 38-44	Record: 50-32	Record: 39-43
Division: 1st	Division: 2nd	Division: 3rd	Division: 1st	Division: 3rd



ANTHONY DAVIS

BEYOND THE ARC

FLAGG'S TEXAS TRANSITION Move aside, lobster rolls. Cooper Flagg, a Maine native, has been spotted at local Mexican and barbecue joints in Dallas. He names those as two of his favorite types of cuisine. Teammate Anthony Davis is a fan of Dallas barbecue as well, listing pecan-smoked brisket as his favorite.

LEGO MASTER Dereck Lively II has a unique off-court hobby: building with LEGO. The Mavs Foundation even featured a "LEGO with Lively" experience at their annual Mavs Ball, showcasing his intricate creations.

KLAY CAN STILL SHOOT In case anyone forgot, Klay Thompson reminded us all of how good of a shooter he is during the offseason. Thompson released a workout video in which he drilled 72 consecutive perfect corner 3s in under two minutes.

LEBRON'S LOVE FOR DALLAS? Whispers continue to circulate about LeBron James' future, and a surprising contender for his services has emerged: Dallas. While he's opted into his contract with the Lakers for the 2025-26 season, reports suggest deep personal and professional ties in Dallas, including former teammates Kyrie Irving and Davis, as well as a strong relationship with general manager Nico Harrison from his Nike days. Could a future free agency move see King James in a Mavs jersey?

concede that shot because he is so good at everything else. Flagg is a good passer and has the size to make all of the reads. He can create his own looks using a bully-ball approach. He’s also an excellent finisher as a roller and a force in transition.

Where Flagg really shines is as a defensive prospect. He has elite instincts and the tools to guard multiple positions. He racked up steals and blocks at Duke, making impact plays all over the floor. He’s rarely in the wrong spot, already understanding defensive rotations as if he’s had a decade of NBA experience. His defense will come along faster than his offense.

The Mavericks have some other starter-caliber players who will be forced to come off the bench. P.J. Washington has bought in defensively and can stretch the floor. Naji Marshall stepped up as a scorer last year. He’s earned the nickname “The Knife” for his ability to do everything. And Olivier-Maxence Prosper is a promising 3-and-D wing who can play spot minutes.

BACKCOURT

Irving’s status this year is unknown. He will miss at least half the year and could very well sit out for its entirety. He’s had multiple injuries to that same left knee, so caution is warranted. He’s the primary on-ball creator and shotmaker on this roster. The Mavericks don’t have anyone to replace what he does.

D’Angelo Russell is a stopgap at point guard who won’t be a total disaster. He’s not the driving, playmaking force normally associated with the position; rather, he’s more of an off-ball catch-and-shoot gunner. The team badly needs his 3-point shooting, though.

Backup Brandon Williams will give a different look as a jitterbug point guard who can put pressure on the rim. Jaden Hardy should also get some chances as a pure scorer, and Dante Exum offers good point-of-attack defense.

Klay Thompson should lock down the starting shooting guard position. Even at 35, he’s still a very effective shooter who hit 39.1% of his 3-pointers last year. Once a very good defender, Thompson

115.0

The Mavericks’ 115.0 defensive rating ranked 20th in the league, exposing backcourt vulnerabilities. With Anthony Davis and Cooper Flagg anchoring the frontcourt, expect a top-10 defensive rating. That will be critical for playoff hopes in a stacked West.



Cooper Flagg ////

OFFSEASON MOVES

DRAFT PICKS

1 COOPER FLAGG

PF, 6-8, 205, Duke

Landing Flagg with the No. 1 overall pick reshapes the Mavs’ future. Flagg’s two-way versatility addresses the loss of Luka Dončić’s playmaking, instantly making him a franchise cornerstone. Flagg is considered one of the stronger top picks in recent memory and prohibitive favorite to win Rookie of the Year if he stays healthy.

OTHER NEWCOMERS

Ryan Nembhard, the younger (and smaller) brother of Andrew, went undrafted and signed a two-way contract. Like his brother, he’s a tough point guard who makes the right play and overcomes physical limitations. Dallas also brought in D’Angelo Russell on a two-year, \$13 million contract. The 29-year-old should play a crucial role until Kyrie Irving comes back.

ROSTER							2024-25 STATISTICS										48-MINUTE PRODUCTIVITY		
HEAD COACH: JASON KIDD (5TH SEASON; CAREER: 362-339)																			
#	PLAYER	POS	HT	WT	DOB	FROM	YRS	G	MPG	FG%	3P%	FT%	RPG	APG	PPG		REB	AST	PTS
3	Anthony Davis	F/C	6-10	253	3/11/93	Kentucky	13	51	33.4	.516	.282	.775	11.6	3.5	24.7		16.6	5.1	35.5
11	Kyrie Irving	G	6-2	195	3/23/92	Duke	14	50	36.1	.473	.401	.916	4.8	4.6	24.7		6.4	6.1	32.8
25	P.J. Washington	F	6-6	230	8/23/98	Kentucky	6	57	32.2	.453	.381	.722	7.8	2.3	14.7		11.6	3.4	21.9
31	Klay Thompson	G	6-5	220	2/08/90	Washington State	12	72	27.3	.412	.391	.905	3.4	2.0	14.0		6.0	3.5	24.6
13	Naji Marshall	F	6-6	220	1/24/98	Xavier	5	69	27.8	.508	.275	.813	4.8	3.0	13.2		8.2	5.2	22.9
5	D’Angelo Russell	G	6-3	193	2/23/96	Ohio State	10	58	25.5	.390	.314	.834	2.8	5.1	12.6		5.3	9.6	23.7
21	Daniel Gafford	F/C	6-10	265	10/01/98	Arkansas	6	57	21.5	.702	.000	.689	6.8	1.4	12.3		15.2	3.1	27.4
00	Max Christie	G	6-5	190	2/10/03	Michigan State	3	78	27.3	.427	.366	.855	3.3	1.9	9.6		5.8	3.3	16.9
0	Danté Exum	G	6-5	214	7/13/95	Australian Inst. of Sport	8	20	18.6	.478	.434	.742	1.7	2.8	8.7		4.3	7.2	22.4
1	Jaden Hardy	G	6-3	198	7/05/02	G League Ignite	3	57	15.9	.435	.386	.698	1.6	1.4	8.7		4.7	4.3	26.2
2	Dereck Lively II	C	7-1	230	2/12/04	Duke	2	36	23.1	.702	.000	.630	7.5	2.4	8.7		15.6	4.9	18.1
10	Brandon Williams	G	6-1	190	11/22/99	Arizona	3	33	14.8	.521	.400	.833	1.8	2.3	8.3		5.7	7.5	27.1
16	Caleb Martin	F	6-5	205	9/28/95	Nevada	6	45	27.1	.424	.359	.622	3.9	2.1	7.9		7.0	3.7	14.0
8	Olivier-Maxence Prosper	F	6-7	230	7/03/02	Marquette	2	52	11.2	.402	.235	.645	2.4	0.8	3.9		10.4	3.3	16.5
7	Dwight Powell	F/C	6-10	240	7/20/91	Stanford	11	55	10.0	.689	.400	.651	2.1	1.0	2.1		10.3	4.8	9.9
	Moussa Cisse	C	6-10	220	9/10/02	Memphis				R — First NBA Season									
	Matthew Cleveland	G/F	6-7	210	9/15/02	Miami (Fla.)				R — First NBA Season									
32	Cooper Flagg	F	6-8	205	12/21/06	Duke				R — First NBA Season									
	Miles Kelly	G	6-6	190	1/26/03	Auburn				R — First NBA Season									
	Ryan Nembhard	G	6-0	180	3/10/03	Gonzaga				R — First NBA Season									



KLAY THOMPSON

has lost several steps on that end, although he can still hold up against slower forwards.

Max Christie adds much-needed depth and may challenge for a starting role. He was a key addition for Dallas in the Dončić trade, bringing good defensive tools and capable 3-point shooting to the roster.

FINAL ANALYSIS

The Mavericks’ championship aspirations are on hold until Irving comes back and looks like the version who was playing at an All-Star level last season. This year, the Mavs should still be a decent team that is competing for a lower-end playoff spot.

That prediction could change if the team gets excellent health from Davis, and Flagg develops faster than anticipated. In that best-case scenario, where Irving also comes back at the end of the year, Dallas could win 50 games.

More likely, they should finish somewhere between seventh and 10th in the Western Conference, fighting for a playoff spot in the Play-In Tournament. They should play a physical, grinding style that is brutally effective on defense. Spacing will be an issue on offense. They will be great on the offensive glass, but they don’t have quite enough offensive juice to keep up with the better teams in the West.

A gap year doesn’t sound too bad. The Mavericks own their 2026 draft pick, and they already have a promising future with Flagg. They have veterans who can fetch pieces in the trade market, which will provide the roster with better balance.

With Flagg getting plenty of opportunities to learn from his mistakes, the Mavs should rebound quickly and be a top-four team in the West within two years.

2025-26 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 22	San Antonio	9:30
Oct. 24	Washington	8:30
Oct. 26	Toronto	7:30
Oct. 27	Oklahoma City	8:30
Oct. 29	Indiana	8:30

NOVEMBER

Nov. 1	Detroit	10:00
Nov. 3	at Houston	8:00
Nov. 5	New Orleans	8:30
Nov. 7	at Memphis*	8:00
Nov. 8	at Washington	7:00
Nov. 10	Milwaukee	8:30
Nov. 12	Phoenix	8:30
Nov. 14	L.A. Clippers*	8:30
Nov. 16	Portland	7:30
Nov. 17	at Minnesota	8:00
Nov. 19	New York	9:30
Nov. 21	New Orleans*	8:30
Nov. 22	Memphis	8:30
Nov. 24	at Miami	7:30
Nov. 28	at L.A. Lakers*	10:00
Nov. 29	at L.A. Clippers	10:00

DECEMBER

Dec. 1	at Denver	9:00
Dec. 3	Miami	8:30
Dec. 5	at Oklahoma City	9:30
Dec. 6	Houston	8:30
Dec. 9, 10	Emirates NBA Cup Quarterfinals	
Dec. 13	Emirates NBA Cup Semifinals	
Dec. 16	Emirates NBA Cup Championship	

Dec. 18	Detroit	8:30
Dec. 20	at Philadelphia	7:00
Dec. 22	at New Orleans	8:00
Dec. 23	Denver	8:00
Dec. 25	at Golden State	5:00
Dec. 27	at Sacramento	5:00
Dec. 29	at Portland	11:00

JANUARY

Jan. 1	Philadelphia	8:30
Jan. 3	Houston	8:30
Jan. 6	at Sacramento	11:00
Jan. 8	at Utah	9:00
Jan. 10	at Chicago	8:00
Jan. 12	Brooklyn	8:30
Jan. 14	Denver	9:30
Jan. 15	Utah	8:30
Jan. 17	Utah	5:00
Jan. 19	at New York	5:00
Jan. 22	Golden State	7:30
Jan. 24	L.A. Lakers	8:30
Jan. 25	at Milwaukee	7:00
Jan. 28	Minnesota	8:30
Jan. 29	Charlotte	8:30
Jan. 31	at Houston	8:30

FEBRUARY

Feb. 3	Boston	8:00
Feb. 5	San Antonio	8:30
Feb. 7	at San Antonio	6:00
Feb. 10	at Phoenix	9:00
Feb. 12	at L.A. Lakers	10:00
Feb. 20	at Minnesota	7:30

Feb. 22	at Indiana	5:00
Feb. 24	at Brooklyn	7:30
Feb. 26	Sacramento	8:30
Feb. 27	Memphis	8:30

MARCH

March 1	Oklahoma City	8:00
March 3	at Charlotte	7:00
March 5	at Orlando	7:00
March 6	at Boston	7:00
March 8	at Toronto	6:00
March 10	at Atlanta	8:00
March 13	Cleveland	8:30
March 15	at Cleveland	3:30
March 16	at New Orleans	8:00
March 18	Atlanta	8:30
March 21	L.A. Clippers	8:30
March 23	Golden State	9:30
March 25	at Denver	10:00
March 27	at Portland	10:00
March 30	Minnesota	8:30

APRIL

April 1	at Memphis	8:00
April 3	Orlando	8:30
April 5	L.A. Lakers	7:30
April 7	at L.A. Clippers	10:30
April 8	at Phoenix	10:00
April 10	at San Antonio	8:00
April 12	Chicago	8:30

**Emirates NBA Cup regular-season game
All times Eastern*



HOUSTON ROCKETS

SOUTHWEST DIVISION PREDICTION: **1ST**

Driving this summer on two of the main highways in inner Houston, you could spot billboards ushering in a new era of Rockets basketball. The roadside signs portray Kevin Durant, the Rockets' new star, alongside the words, "Welcome to Houston." It's a simple image that conveys the franchise's new post-rebuild ethos: The time to compete for an NBA championship is now.

Over the past two seasons, head coach Ime Udoka crafted the Rockets into a team of relentless rebounders and gritty defenders. After the Rockets made the playoffs last season as the Western Conference's No. 2 seed but lost a seven-game first-round series to the Golden State Warriors, it was clear that Houston needed to upgrade its offense with 3-point shooting and a primary scorer.

The Rockets did that with minimal sacrifice. They traded away starters Jalen Green and Dillon Brooks and some draft capital to get Durant in a massive seven-team deal that also brought Clint Capela, and they dumped 2023 first-round pick Cam Whitmore for future draft picks. The team did retain the bulk of the young core: Alperen Şengün, Jabari Smith Jr., Amen Thompson, Tari Eason and Reed Sheppard. Starting point guard Fred VanVleet and backup center Steven Adams, both standouts in the playoff series, agreed to take less money to return, while free-agent signing Dorian Finney-Smith adds a 3-and-D presence.

Houston is now older and more experienced and possesses an elite go-to scorer in Durant. If the Rockets can successfully integrate their new pieces with their established identity, and if the young players led by Şengün and Thompson continue to unlock new levels, they might be able to unseat the Oklahoma City Thunder at the top of the Western Conference.

FRONTCOURT

Udoka is partial to long, defensive-minded wing players who can play multiple positions. Houston's frontcourt is absolutely loaded with forwards of a similar archetype.

The crown jewel is Durant, one of the best isolation scorers in league history who plays as a point forward with multiple weapons at his disposal. He slots right into sets the Rockets love to run, featuring scissor and backdoor cuts, often out of the horns alignment; Durant and Udoka utilized similar actions when they worked together with the Brooklyn Nets. Sustainability will be a priority for the Rockets and Durant in his age-37 season, so he might take occasional games off to prepare for a postseason run.

The other starting forward spot has potential for a playing time battle between Smith and Finney-Smith, the latter of whom was

SCOUTING THE ROCKETS

ANONYMOUS TAKES
FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

"They really took a massive swing with that Kevin Durant trade. It feels great on paper, but he sure didn't get Brooklyn or Phoenix over the top. And he was younger then. ... I'm not saying it was a bad move, but Durant is sort of like fool's gold. But he's a heck of a lot better than Jalen Green and Dillon Brooks combined.

So it was worth a shot. ... Alperen Şengün is incredibly physical and can completely take opponents out of their game. I think he's gonna be an All-Star for a while. ... The good thing about Durant is he is a star who doesn't mind conceding shots to guys like Şengün and Fred VanVleet. ... Amen Thompson is a major nuisance in a good way."



FRED
VANVLEET

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Record: 17-55	Record: 20-62	Record: 22-60	Record: 41-41	Record: 52-30
Division: 5th	Division: 5th	Division: 4th	Division: 3rd	Division: 1st

FROM LEFT: KELLEY L COX-IMAGN IMAGES; THOMAS SHEA-IMAGN IMAGES



ALPEREN ŞENGÜN



BEYOND THE ARC

UNUSUAL BESTIES

Steven Adams and Reed Sheppard have developed a close friendship highlighted by playful ribbing and sarcastic remarks. They compete against each other every chance they get during and after practice. They both love farms and the outdoors and even took a trip to the Houston Rodeo together last year.

UPGRADING THE OFFENSE

Kevin Durant's shooting splits last season — .527 from the field, .430 on 3-pointers, .574 on 2-pointers and .839 at the free-throw line — were all better than the Rockets' team averages.

FROM AAU TO THE NBA

When he was a teenager, Rockets assistant Garrett Jackson played for Ime Udoka's I-5 Elite AAU team in Portland. Udoka helped Jackson land his first NBA job in the San Antonio Spurs video department and later brought Jackson onto his Boston Celtics staff when he was the head coach (2021-23). Not surprisingly, Udoka was able to lure Jackson to Houston to join his Rockets staff.

GAME-WINNER

Remember Amen Thompson's clutch game-winner that beat the Celtics at TD Garden last season? Thompson cherishes that moment so much that he has vowed to never again wear the exact shoes he was wearing when he made the shot, a pair of bright pink Nike Air Zoom G.T. Cut 3s.



HOUSTON ROCKETS

brought in as a replacement for Brooks. Finney-Smith is a better 3-point shooter than Smith, is an ardent perimeter defender and does well as a small-ball center. Smith's biggest shortcoming is his dribbling, but his size (at 6-foot-10, he's three inches taller than Finney-Smith) and efficient mid-range shooting give him the edge to start.

Eason, a steal-hungry transition demon, brings additional depth and will be even more effective if he increases his 3-point volume and shakes off his past injury issues. Jeff Green, Jae'Sean Tate and Josh Okogie round out the forwards.

The center position is where the Rockets have the most variability, with Şengün, Adams and Capela each providing distinct skill sets. Şengün remains the obvious starter and is a playmaking hub who creates primarily out of the high post or along the baseline. Durant's gravity should draw defensive attention away from Şengün and allow the Rockets to use pick-and-rolls or high-low actions to slip Şengün to the basket, provided the Turkish big man can adjust to having the ball in his hands less often.

Adams is a beast on the offensive glass, and his screen-setting is crucial to create space in the lane or spring the Rockets' guards for 3-point shots. Expect the Rockets to lean even harder into double-big lineups after the Şengün-Adams tandem was so successful in the playoff series against Golden State. Houston can also go small with Smith, Green, Finney-Smith or Durant at center.

The Rockets are most likely to deploy Capela to give Adams a breather. The main obstacle for both Adams and Capela is staying healthy; Adams missed 24 games last season, and Capela missed 27.

BACKCOURT

VanVleet returns as the Rockets' starting point guard, and the Rockets will seek to exploit his 3-point shooting even more. With Durant able to initiate offense, Houston will not have to be as reliant on VanVleet to handle the ball in pick-and-rolls and can use him as a floor spacer and outside shooter away from initial actions. VanVleet is also a remarkably effective screener whom the

90/97/98

Per Cleaning the Glass, when Dorian-Finney Smith was on the floor last season, the Los Angeles Lakers' halfcourt offense was plus-9.3 points better and the Brooklyn Nets' halfcourt offense was plus-10.8 points better — putting Finney-Smith's impact in the 97th and 98th percentile, respectively, of all NBA players. When Kevin Durant was on the floor, the Phoenix Suns' offense was plus-6.2 points better, putting Durant in the 90th percentile.



Kevin Durant

OFFSEASON MOVES

The Rockets did not draft anyone this summer after they traded both their draft picks to the Phoenix Suns, but they acquired Kevin Durant and Clint Capela in a seven-team trade, the largest in NBA history, and separately signed free agents Dorian Finney-Smith and Josh Okogie. The Rockets also signed guard JD Davison (the No. 53 pick by the Celtics in the 2022 draft), forward Isaiah Crawford and guard Kevon Harris to two-way contracts.

ROSTER																
HEAD COACH: IME UDOKA (3RD SEASON; CAREER: 144-102)																
2024-25 STATISTICS																
#	PLAYER	POS	HT	WT	DOB	FROM	YRS	G	MPG	FG%	3P%	FT%	RPG	APG	PPG	48-MINUTE PRODUCTIVITY
7	Kevin Durant	F	6-11	240	9/29/88	Texas	17	62	36.5	.527	.430	.839	6.0	4.2	26.6	7.9 5.6 34.9
28	Alperen Şengün	C	6-11	243	7/25/02	Besiktas	4	76	31.5	.496	.233	.692	10.3	4.9	19.1	15.8 7.5 29.1
1	Amen Thompson	G/F	6-7	200	1/30/03	Overtime Elite	2	69	32.3	.557	.275	.684	8.2	3.8	14.1	12.2 5.7 20.9
5	Fred VanVleet	G	6-0	197	2/25/94	Wichita State	9	60	35.2	.378	.345	.810	3.7	5.6	14.1	5.0 7.6 19.2
10	Jabari Smith Jr.	F	6-10	220	5/13/03	Auburn	3	57	30.1	.438	.354	.825	7.0	1.1	12.2	11.2 1.7 19.5
17	Tari Eason	F	6-8	215	5/10/01	LSU	3	57	24.9	.487	.342	.760	6.4	1.5	12.0	12.2 2.8 23.2
21	Clint Capela	C	6-10	256	5/18/94	Elan Chalon	11	55	21.4	.559	.000	.536	8.5	1.1	8.9	19.1 2.5 19.9
2	Dorian Finney-Smith	F	6-7	220	5/04/93	Florida	9	63	28.9	.448	.411	.667	3.9	1.4	8.7	6.5 2.4 14.5
12	Josh Okogie	G	6-4	213	9/01/98	Georgia Tech	7	40	15.6	.443	.348	.741	2.8	0.8	7.1	8.7 2.5 21.7
3	N'Faly Dante	C	6-11	230	10/19/01	Oregon	1	4	12.7	.769	.000	.800	5.3	0.5	6.0	19.9 1.9 22.8
0	Aaron Holiday	G	6-0	185	9/30/96	UCLA	7	62	12.8	.437	.398	.829	1.3	1.3	5.5	4.7 5.0 20.6
32	Jeff Green	F	6-8	235	8/28/86	Georgetown	17	32	12.4	.504	.367	.808	1.8	0.6	5.4	7.0 2.4 20.8
15	Reed Sheppard	G	6-2	185	6/24/04	Kentucky	1	52	12.6	.351	.338	.813	1.5	1.4	4.4	5.7 5.5 16.8
12	Steven Adams	C	6-11	265	7/20/93	Pitt	11	58	13.7	.545	.000	.462	5.6	1.1	3.9	19.8 4.0 13.6
8	Jae'Sean Tate	F	6-4	230	10/28/95	Ohio State	5	52	11.3	.473	.348	.681	2.3	0.9	3.6	9.5 3.8 15.3
20	JD Davison	G	6-1	195	10/03/02	Alabama	3	16	5.8	.353	.222	.714	0.8	0.8	2.1	6.7 6.7 17.0
24	Isaiah Crawford	F	6-6	220	11/01/01	Louisiana Tech	1	15	3.0	.455	.200	.500	0.5	0.1	0.9	8.4 1.1 13.7
8	Kevon Harris	G	6-5	216	6/24/97	Stephen F. Austin	2	Did Not Play NBA								
	Cam Matthews	F	6-7	235	12/23/01	Mississippi State		R — First NBA Season								



AMEN THOMPSON

Rockets often involve in inverted pick-and-rolls with Şengün, something they can run even more often now with Durant.

Thompson played essentially every position for Houston last season but is set to spend more time at his natural guard position this year. In addition to his show-stopping displays of athleticism, Thompson can run a pick-and-roll and make smart decisions. He vastly improved as a ball-handler, and his defensive versatility is vital to the Rockets' schemes.

The Rockets' guard depth is thin with only Sheppard and veteran Aaron Holiday on the bench. Sheppard's greatest strength is his shooting, but he must shoot the 3 more consistently and at a higher clip than he did as a rookie (33.8% on 2.7 attempts per game). Defensively, Sheppard has good instincts and quick hands but needs to better withstand physicality to improve as a point-of-attack defender.

Holiday is an above-average defender and shooter and an adequate distributor. Still, he is below Sheppard (and many others) on the totem pole when it comes to on-ball reps. Holiday's role will likely be an off-ball floor spacer, with some point guard duties for the bench unit.

FINAL ANALYSIS

Even at 37, Durant raises the Rockets' ceiling. The question is, how much? If Durant's stints in Brooklyn and with the Phoenix Suns show anything, it's that chemistry with the supporting cast is vital. Şengün and Thompson have shown glimpses of star potential, but the Rockets are also betting on Smith and Sheppard to take giant leaps. On paper, Houston has addressed its 3-point shooting and halfcourt offense woes. Although the team's lack of guard depth could present issues down the line, a run to the Western Conference finals for the first time since 2018 seems very possible.

2025-26 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 21	at Oklahoma City	7:30
Oct. 24	Detroit	8:00
Oct. 27	Brooklyn	8:00
Oct. 29	at Toronto	7:30

NOVEMBER

Nov. 1	at Boston	8:00
Nov. 3	Dallas	8:00
Nov. 5	at Memphis	8:00
Nov. 7	at San Antonio*	7:30
Nov. 9	at Milwaukee	3:30
Nov. 12	Washington	8:00
Nov. 14	Portland*	8:00
Nov. 16	Orlando	7:00
Nov. 19	at Cleveland	7:00
Nov. 21	Denver*	9:30
Nov. 24	at Phoenix	9:30
Nov. 26	at Golden State*	10:00
Nov. 30	at Utah	3:00

DECEMBER

Dec. 1	at Utah	9:00
Dec. 3	Sacramento	8:00
Dec. 5	Phoenix	8:00
Dec. 6	at Dallas	8:30
Dec. 9, 10	Emirates NBA Cup Quarterfinals	
Dec. 13	Emirates NBA Cup Semifinals	
Dec. 16	Emirates NBA Cup Championship	
Dec. 18	at New Orleans	8:00
Dec. 20	at Denver	5:00
Dec. 21	at Sacramento	10:00
Dec. 23	at L.A. Clippers	11:00

Dec. 25	at L.A. Lakers	8:00
Dec. 27	Cleveland	8:00
Dec. 29	Indiana	8:00

JANUARY

Jan. 1	at Brooklyn	6:00
Jan. 3	at Dallas	8:30
Jan. 5	Phoenix	8:00
Jan. 7	at Portland	10:00
Jan. 9	at Portland	10:00
Jan. 11	at Sacramento	9:00
Jan. 13	Chicago	8:00
Jan. 15	Oklahoma City	7:30
Jan. 16	Minnesota	9:30
Jan. 18	New Orleans	7:00
Jan. 20	San Antonio	8:00
Jan. 22	at Philadelphia	7:00
Jan. 23	at Detroit	7:00
Jan. 26	Memphis	8:00
Jan. 28	San Antonio	9:30
Jan. 29	at Atlanta	8:00
Jan. 31	Dallas	8:30

FEBRUARY

Feb. 2	at Indiana	7:00
Feb. 4	Boston	8:00
Feb. 5	Charlotte	8:00
Feb. 7	at Oklahoma City	3:30
Feb. 10	L.A. Clippers	8:00
Feb. 11	L.A. Clippers	8:00
Feb. 19	at Charlotte	7:00
Feb. 21	at New York	8:30
Feb. 23	Utah	9:30

Feb. 25	Sacramento	8:00
Feb. 26	at Orlando	7:30
Feb. 28	at Miami	3:00

MARCH

March 2	at Washington	7:00
March 5	Golden State	7:30
March 6	Portland	8:00
March 8	at San Antonio	8:00
March 10	Toronto	8:00
March 11	at Denver	10:00
March 13	New Orleans	8:00
March 16	L.A. Lakers	9:00
March 18	L.A. Lakers	9:30
March 20	Atlanta	8:00
March 21	Miami	8:00
March 23	at Chicago	8:00
March 25	at Minnesota	9:30
March 27	at Memphis	8:00
March 29	at New Orleans	7:00
March 31	New York	8:00

APRIL

April 1	Milwaukee	8:00
April 3	Utah	8:00
April 5	at Golden State	10:00
April 7	at Phoenix	11:00
April 9	Philadelphia	8:00
April 10	Minnesota	8:00
April 12	Memphis	8:30

*Emirates NBA Cup regular-season game
All times Eastern



MEMPHIS GRIZZLIES

SOUTHWEST DIVISION PREDICTION: 4TH

If the 2025-26 Memphis Grizzlies were a car, they would be a standard sedan that just pulled out of the mechanic shop. The question is where this car is headed. Is it taking the interstate on-ramp and flying down the road, or is it making a U-turn for a trade-in at the dealership?

The offseason moves by general manager Zach Kleiman opened the window for both possibilities.

In June, the Grizzlies traded away Desmond Bane, a 20-point scorer on a near-max contract, to the Orlando Magic for a return of veterans and draft capital. While the franchise publicly stated that the deal was made to retool around star players Ja Morant and Jaren Jackson Jr., it's also fair to recognize that it could potentially serve as the early start of a full rebuild.

It's why the upcoming season appears so critical for the direction of the franchise. Memphis may not know where it's going just yet, but it stands to find out.

FRONTCOURT

Jackson, a two-time All-Star, enters 2025-26 coming off one of his most productive offensive seasons as a pro but also off surgery to repair a turf toe injury. The 26-year-old forward has been on an upward trajectory both offensively and defensively since his rookie season, which is encouraging, although Jackson hasn't developed much as a rebounder despite his 6-foot-10 size. The recovery from the procedure is expected to lead all the way up to the start of the regular season. If Jackson is not ready for the opener, Memphis will be very thin in the frontcourt.

The Grizzlies already know they won't have projected starting center Zach Edey available in October. Edey could miss more than a month after offseason surgery to fix an unstable ankle. Even with a lost summer, Memphis will look to Edey for improvement entering his second NBA season. The 7-foot-4 center figures to play a more prominent role offensively than he did as a rookie, in part because new head coach Tuomas Iisalo will implement a system with heavy usage of the pick-and-roll.

Edey's expected absence leaves Santi Aldama, Brandon Clarke and free-agent signing Jock Landale as the likely candidates to replace him in the starting frontcourt. Landale will be considered the early favorite because he plays as a traditional center and Clarke is coming off an offseason spent rehabbing a knee injury.

In addition to that group of reserves, Memphis could use GG Jackson, who is 6-foot-9, to fill minutes as a small-ball forward. The Grizzlies also signed center PJ Hall to a two-way contract in July

SCOUTING THE GRIZZLIES

ANONYMOUS TAKES FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

"I don't have a big problem with the Desmond Bane trade because they weren't going anywhere with him. So why not try to shake it up? ... Ja Morant is truly a do-it-all, so this isn't a shot at him. But how far can you really go with him as your top option? Maybe far, but I think it's fair to start wondering. ... Jaren Jackson Jr. is fantastic at both ends. Everyone can only dream of having a young power forward like that. ... Kentavious Caldwell-Pope gives them a level of professionalism and backcourt defense that had been lacking. ... Ty Jerome was a nice pickup, but boy, will they change speeds when he checks in for Morant."



JAREN JACKSON JR.

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Record: 38-34	Record: 56-26	Record: 51-31	Record: 27-55	Record: 48-34
Division: 2nd	Division: 1st	Division: 1st	Division: 4th	Division: 2nd



JA MORANT

BEYOND THE ARC

BERLIN BOUND Memphis will play the NBA's first-ever regular-season game in Berlin on Jan. 15, 2026. Finnish head coach Tuomas Iisalo speaks fluent German and lived in the German capital for four years of his childhood as his father worked as a foreign correspondent.

SELLING SHOES Nike released the Ja 3 signature shoe worldwide in August. Morant completed a tour of the United States, China and the Philippines to promote its release. It was the point guard's first time in Asia.

BOARD WORK The National Basketball Players Association (NBPA) Foundation named forward/center Santi Aldama to its board of directors in July. Aldama, who is from Spain, will identify new opportunities for the Foundation to support players' social impact work around the world.

CEDRIC THE ENTERTAINER Cedric Coward, whom the Grizzlies selected with the No. 11 overall pick out of Washington State, got his start in Division III college basketball. When recruiting him, Willamette University coach Kip Ioane said he asked, "How do we burn these tapes immediately to make sure no one else can see him?" Coward is also a chef and has already offered to cook wings for his teammates.

MEMPHIS GRIZZLIES

as an insurance policy should they need more rebounding help in October and November.

Overall, the Grizzlies should feel good about the upside of a frontcourt that features Edey, Aldama and both Jacksons — all 25 or younger — but the depth of that group will be tested early.

BACKCOURT

Morant is the headliner. At his peak, the point guard is one of the league’s most dynamic playmakers and a magician around the rim. The problem, however, is that Morant hasn’t been able to stay on the court enough to be reliable.

He’s played in only 59 games since 2023-24 due to injuries and suspension, and he played more than five straight games last season only once. His ultra-aggressive style creates plenty of breath-holding after hard collisions and violent plummets from above the rim.

Still, the Grizzlies have continued to back their star despite his lack of availability. The decision to hire Iisalo, who had no previous NBA head-coaching experience, aligned with Morant’s preferences offensively.

Morant was frustrated with the “wheel” concepts the team used under Taylor Jenkins last season (Memphis used the fewest ball screens in the league), but now he figures to be the primary ball-handler in a system with heavy use of the pick-and-roll.

But will it be enough to make Memphis more competitive in a loaded Western Conference? Maybe not. Ultimately, the Bane trade was an acknowledgment of that reality.

Kleiman said the draft picks Memphis acquired in the transaction would help the Grizzlies search for “higher-end outcomes.” In other words, he was willing to trade a proven player for the chance of adding others with more potential on the wing.

The Grizzlies immediately traded one of those newly acquired picks along with their own first-rounder for the chance to draft Cedric Coward, who is likely to become an immediate part of the rotation.

Additionally, Memphis added veterans Ty Jerome and Kentavious Caldwell-Pope to the



Memphis started 17.2% of its possessions in transition last season, the second-highest percentage in the NBA. The Grizzlies led the league in transition points per 100 possessions (4.0) despite Ja Morant’s limited action. They will aim for a similar pace this season, even with a new head coach.



Kentavious Caldwell-Pope

OFFSEASON MOVES

- DRAFT PICKS
- 1 CEDRIC COWARD
SF, 6-6, 206, Washington State
 - 2 JAVON SMALL
PG, 6-3, 190, West Virginia
 - 2 JAHMAI MASHACK
SG, 6-4, 203, Tennessee

Coward has a 7-foot-2 wingspan and shot better than 38% from 3-point range in his college career. He did not play in the Summer League due to a shoulder injury but is expected to be ready for the start of the regular season. Small and Mashack are likely to begin the season on two-way contracts and will see G League action.

OTHER NEWCOMERS

Kentavious Caldwell-Pope will likely be a consistent starter on the wing. Ty Jerome will play the role of sixth man. Jock Landale will operate as a depth piece down low.

ROSTER							2024-25 STATISTICS										48-MINUTE PRODUCTIVITY		
HEAD COACH: TUOMAS IISALO (2ND SEASON; CAREER: 4-5)																			
#	PLAYER	POS	HT	WT	DOB	FROM	YRS	G	MPG	FG%	3P%	FT%	RPG	APG	PPG		REB	AST	PTS
12	Ja Morant	G	6-2	174	8/10/99	Murray State	6	50	30.4	.454	.309	.824	4.1	7.3	23.2		6.5	11.5	36.6
8	Jaren Jackson Jr.	F/C	6-10	242	9/15/99	Michigan State	7	74	29.8	.488	.375	.781	5.6	2.0	22.2		9.1	3.2	35.7
2	Ty Jerome	G/F	6-5	195	7/08/97	Virginia	6	70	19.9	.516	.439	.872	2.5	3.4	12.5		6.0	8.2	30.3
7	Santi Aldama	F/C	7-0	215	9/10/01	Loyola-Maryland	4	65	25.5	.483	.368	.691	6.4	2.9	12.5		12.0	5.4	23.5
0	Jaylen Wells	F	6-8	206	8/26/03	Washington State	1	79	25.9	.425	.352	.822	3.4	1.7	10.4		6.3	3.2	19.3
1	Scotty Pippen Jr.	G	6-1	170	11/10/00	Vanderbilt	3	79	21.3	.480	.397	.713	3.3	4.4	9.9		7.4	9.9	22.2
14	Zach Edey	C	7-4	305	5/14/02	Purdue	1	66	21.5	.580	.346	.709	8.3	1.0	9.2		18.6	2.2	20.7
3	Ken. Caldwell-Pope	G	6-5	204	2/18/93	Georgia	12	77	29.6	.439	.342	.863	2.2	1.8	8.7		3.6	2.9	14.2
15	Brandon Clarke	F	6-8	215	9/19/96	Gonzaga	6	64	18.9	.621	.059	.701	5.1	1.0	8.3		13.0	2.6	21.2
45	GG Jackson	F	6-9	210	12/17/04	South Carolina	2	29	15.8	.372	.337	.725	3.2	1.0	7.2		9.6	3.0	21.9
5	Vince Williams Jr.	G	6-4	205	8/30/00	VCU	3	27	18.5	.401	.274	.792	3.6	2.0	6.6		9.4	5.3	17.2
2	Jock Landale	C	6-11	255	10/25/95	St. Mary's	4	42	11.9	.533	.423	.675	3.3	0.9	4.8		13.2	3.6	19.2
24	Cam Spencer	G	6-4	205	4/06/00	UConn	1	25	10.1	.415	.365	1.000	1.2	1.4	4.2		5.7	6.5	20.2
46	John Konchar	G	6-5	210	3/22/96	IPFW	6	46	12.1	.451	.371	.875	3.3	0.9	2.4		13.0	3.6	9.6
13	PJ Hall	C	6-10	245	2/21/02	Clemson	1	19	3.5	.583	.250	.750	1.2	0.2	1.7		16.0	2.9	23.9
23	Cedric Coward	G	6-6	206	9/11/03	Washington State													
	Jahmai Mashack	G	6-4	203	11/10/02	Tennessee													
10	Javon Small	G	6-3	190	12/19/02	West Virginia													
										R — First NBA Season									
										R — First NBA Season									
										R — First NBA Season									



ZACH EDEY

backcourt, which will be rounded out by Scotty Pippen Jr., Jaylen Wells and Vince Williams Jr.

Wells and Caldwell-Pope are the most likely candidates to join Morant as starters, but it's the Jerome addition that may have the biggest impact. Jerome comes to Memphis after an impressive season with the Cleveland Cavaliers in 2024-25, where he transformed into a Sixth Man of the Year candidate following five previous campaigns as a journeyman. He brings efficiency as a playmaker and spot-up shooter.

It's likely Memphis will pair Jerome with Pippen when Morant is not on the court in hopes of addressing turnover problems and a lack of offensive punch. Jerome was one of the best players in the NBA last season at getting downhill to a mid-range floater, which matches Morant's style closely and should help the Grizzlies survive without their star.

Caldwell-Pope, on the other hand, will be an important cog on the wing in Iisalo's new defensive system, which is predicated on consistent ball pressure. He immediately becomes the veteran voice in the locker room and will play a role in guiding first- and second-year players Coward and Wells.

FINAL ANALYSIS

Will replacing Bane with a trio of players be enough to put the Grizzlies back on the path to success? On paper, Memphis doesn't have a roster that can compete with the top of the Western Conference. It's likely to begin the season shorthanded. The one outcome that could change everything: Morant stays healthy and returns to dominant form. History is not on his side.

A season in the playoff mix could be enough to avoid the off-ramp from retool to rebuild for Memphis, but it won't completely take the detour option off the table.

2025-26 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 22	New Orleans	8:00
Oct. 24	Miami	8:00
Oct. 25	Indiana	8:00
Oct. 27	at Golden State	10:00
Oct. 29	at Phoenix	10:00
Oct. 31	L.A. Lakers*	9:30

NOVEMBER

Nov. 2	at Toronto	6:00
Nov. 3	Detroit	8:00
Nov. 5	Houston	8:00
Nov. 7	Dallas*	8:00
Nov. 9	Oklahoma City	6:00
Nov. 11	at New York	7:30
Nov. 12	at Boston	7:30
Nov. 15	at Cleveland	5:00
Nov. 18	at San Antonio	8:00
Nov. 20	Sacramento	8:00
Nov. 22	at Dallas	8:30
Nov. 24	Denver	8:00
Nov. 26	at New Orleans*	8:00
Nov. 28	at L.A. Clippers*	10:00
Nov. 30	at Sacramento	9:00

DECEMBER

Dec. 2	at San Antonio	8:00
Dec. 5	L.A. Clippers	8:00
Dec. 7	Portland	6:00
Dec. 9, 10	Emirates NBA Cup Quarterfinals	
Dec. 13	Emirates NBA Cup Semifinals	
Dec. 16	Emirates NBA Cup Championship	
Dec. 17	at Minnesota	8:00

Dec. 20	Washington	8:00
Dec. 22	at Oklahoma City	9:30
Dec. 23	at Utah	9:00
Dec. 26	Milwaukee	8:00
Dec. 28	at Washington	6:00
Dec. 30	Philadelphia	8:00

JANUARY

Jan. 2	at L.A. Lakers	10:30
Jan. 4	at L.A. Lakers	9:30
Jan. 6	San Antonio	8:00
Jan. 7	Phoenix	8:00
Jan. 9	Oklahoma City	8:00
Jan. 11	Brooklyn	3:30
Jan. 15	Orlando	2:00
Jan. 18	Orlando	12:00
Jan. 21	Atlanta	8:00
Jan. 23	New Orleans	8:00
Jan. 25	Denver	3:30
Jan. 26	Houston	8:00
Jan. 28	Charlotte	8:00
Jan. 30	at New Orleans	7:30
Jan. 31	Minnesota	8:00

FEBRUARY

Feb. 2	Minnesota	9:30
Feb. 4	at Sacramento	10:00
Feb. 6	at Portland	10:00
Feb. 7	at Portland	10:00
Feb. 9	at Golden State	10:00
Feb. 11	at Denver	10:00
Feb. 20	Utah	7:00
Feb. 21	at Miami	8:00

Feb. 23	Sacramento	8:00
Feb. 25	Golden State	7:30
Feb. 27	at Dallas	8:30

MARCH

March 1	at Indiana	5:00
March 3	at Minnesota	8:00
March 4	Portland	8:00
March 7	L.A. Clippers	8:00
March 9	at Brooklyn	7:30
March 10	at Philadelphia	7:00
March 13	at Detroit	7:30
March 16	at Chicago	8:00
March 18	New York	8:00
March 20	Boston	8:00
March 21	at Charlotte	7:00
March 23	at Atlanta	7:00
March 25	San Antonio	8:00
March 27	Houston	8:00
March 28	Chicago	8:00
March 30	Phoenix	8:00

APRIL

April 1	Dallas	8:00
April 3	Toronto	8:00
April 5	at Milwaukee	3:30
April 6	Cleveland	8:00
April 8	at Denver	9:00
April 10	at Utah	9:30
April 12	at Houston	8:30

*Emirates NBA Cup regular-season game
All times Eastern



NO PELICANS

SOUTHWEST DIVISION PREDICTION: **5TH**

The New Orleans Pelicans are coming off a year in which anything that could go wrong, did go wrong. New Orleans was supposed to be a playoff team. Instead, the Pelicans finished with the fourth-worst record in the league. The good news is that they were able to add a solid young prospect in No. 7 overall pick Jeremiah Fears thanks to all of that losing. Executive vice president David Griffin was let go, and Joe Dumars will now get a chance to retool this roster after a stint as executive vice president and head of basketball operations for the NBA.

This team clearly needed to make some big changes after the lost season. Gone are scorers CJ McCollum and Brandon Ingram, and coming in are two former Golden State Warriors with championship experience in Jordan Poole and Kevon Looney. Those two should add better balance to a roster that didn't work particularly well together in previous years.

There's pressure on New Orleans to win this season. The Pelicans have already traded their 2026 draft pick, so there's no incentive for them to be bad again. They'll pray for better health, most notably from Zion Williamson. They still have two fantastic wings on their roster in Herbert Jones and Trey Murphy III.

Will that be enough? There's talent here, but New Orleans' luck will need to change in order to maximize it.

FRONTCOURT

The Pelicans didn't come into last season with great center depth. Yves Missi was a pleasant surprise as a capable rookie starter but experienced his fair share of growing pains. He's a great athlete who can finish lobs and block shots, but he gets into trouble when he puts the ball on the floor. He must expand his skill set this year. Looney is a grizzled veteran who can provide backup minutes, adding toughness and rebounding. There isn't much depth behind those two.

Williamson is the obvious starter at power forward. When he's been healthy, he has played like a top-10 talent in the league. Nobody is better at putting his head down and getting to the rim. He's in the conversation for best athlete in the league. He's also an underrated passer whom the Pelicans have used successfully in a point forward role.

The team will have to find minutes for forward Derik Queen after trading a king's ransom to select him with this year's No. 13 overall pick. Queen is already a capable scorer and great passer, but he has major defensive limitations and maturity questions that may limit his impact early on. The Pelicans gave up the No. 23 pick and what could

SCOUTING THE PELICANS

ANONYMOUS TAKES FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

"It's do-or-die time for Zion Williamson. They keep moving the parts around him to the same results. ... Of course, it was unfortunate that they lost Dejounte Murray for the season. I think we need to see Murray and Jordan Poole in the back-court for a full season before we pass judgment. ... They have the talent, and I like Willie Green as coach. But you can't tell what's here until they're able to keep them all on the court for an extended period. ... Herbert Jones and Trey Murphy III are excellent complementary pieces. Other than that, they have a lot of 'what-if' guys coming off the bench. ... Who knows? Maybe this will be the year Zion and all the rest finally stay healthy."

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Record: 31-41	Record: 36-46	Record: 42-40	Record: 49-33	Record: 21-61
Division: 4th	Division: 3rd	Division: 2nd	Division: 2nd	Division: 5th



HERBERT JONES

FROM LEFT: MATTHEW HINTON-IMAGN IMAGES; JESSE JOHNSON-IMAGN IMAGES



ZION WILLIAMSON

BEYOND THE ARC

BAYOU VOODOO Former Pelican Dyson Daniels made a huge leap after being traded to the Atlanta Hawks last season in exchange for Dejounte Murray. Injuries kept Daniels' production down while in New Orleans, like so many other players in the franchise's history. Daniels believes that may not be a coincidence. "That organization's cursed," he said last season. "There's something down in that water down there or something. They got hamstrings. They got knees. They got concussions and stuff as well. They get everything down there."

DOUBLING UP How often does Zion Williamson get double-teamed? More than any other player in the tracking era (since 2013-14), according to NBA analyst and former New York Knicks analytics guru Owen Phillips. According to Phillips, the gap between Zion and the next-closest player is equal to the gap between the second-most double-teamed player and the 100th-most double-teamed player.

THE BLENDER The Pelicans might not have the best team in the league, but they do have the best arena nickname. Smoothie King Center is affectionately referred to as "The Blender" by local fans. And during Mardi Gras season, the team breaks out a truly terrifying mascot — a smiling baby wearing just a crown and diaper, mimicking the plastic toy found in the King Cake, the famous local dessert.

NEW ORLEANS PELICANS

be a great 2026 first-rounder to select Queen at No. 13 in a highly controversial move.

None of the four stretches the floor particularly well, so it's important to get plus shooting from the small forward position. Murphy provides that volume 3-point shooting. He's more than just a shooter, though, possessing the athleticism to finish with authority at the rim. He has legitimate All-Star upside if he can stay healthy.

Saddiq Bey is another offseason trade addition who will add even more depth to the wing. He's a solid 3-and-D veteran who hasn't played since tearing his ACL in March 2024.

BACKCOURT

Dejounte Murray is coming off a very down year in which he struggled both physically and mentally. He broke his hand early in the season, had several family tragedies and tore his Achilles in January. That injury will likely keep him out of action for the start of the season, but he should return to the lineup at some point.

Poole will likely be the de facto point guard to start the season, although he's much more of a pure scorer than a distributor.

After a disastrous first year with the Washington Wizards, he looked more like himself last season. He's a good 3-point shooter and can create his own offense. His defense and shot selection are problematic, but the Pelicans will need his talent.

Behind Poole, the Pelicans have a high-quality backup point guard in Jose Alvarado. He's an undersized pest with the biggest heart in the league and a killer nickname to match. Grand Theft Alvarado has his own signature move, sneaking behind players on inbounds passes to tip the ball away for steals. He has never played more than 61 games in a season, so his minutes will need to be monitored in order to preserve his health.

Rookie Fears could get some minutes while Murray recovers, too. He's already got fantastic dribbling skills, but his jump shot and decision-making need more polish.

-9.5

The Pelicans lost by an average of 9.5 points per game last year, the second-worst number in the league behind the Washington Wizards. Two seasons ago, with a similar roster and better health, they outscored teams by an average of 4.4 points.

They should land somewhere in between those two numbers this season.



Jordan Poole

OFFSEASON MOVES

DRAFT PICKS

1 JEREMIAH FEARS
G, 6-4, 190, Oklahoma

1 DERIK QUEEN
F/C, 6-10, 250, Maryland

2 MICAH PEAVY
G/F, 6-7, 215, Georgetown

Fears, the seventh overall pick in the draft, is a guard with a lightning-quick first step and great ball-handling ability. His shooting form looks good, but he will have to improve his consistency. Queen is an ultra-talented scorer and passer who faces questions about his lack of athleticism. Peavy is an older prospect who can hit open spot-up 3-pointers and play good defense.

OTHER NEWCOMERS

New Orleans also added Jordan Poole and Saddiq Bey as part of the CJ McCollum trade with the Washington Wizards and Kevon Looney in free agency. Those three veterans should all play significant minutes.

ROSTER							2024-25 STATISTICS										48-MINUTE PRODUCTIVITY		
HEAD COACH: WILLIE GREEN (5TH SEASON; CAREER: 148-180)																			
#	PLAYER	POS	HT	WT	DOB	FROM	YRS	G	MPG	FG%	3P%	FT%	RPG	APG	PPG		REB	AST	PTS
1	Zion Williamson	F	6-6	284	7/06/00	Duke	5	30	28.6	.567	.231	.656	7.2	5.3	24.6		12.1	8.9	41.3
25	Trey Murphy III	F	6-8	206	6/18/00	Virginia	4	53	35.0	.454	.361	.887	5.1	3.5	21.2		6.9	4.9	29.1
3	Jordan Poole	G	6-4	194	6/19/99	Michigan	6	68	29.4	.432	.378	.883	3.0	4.5	20.5		4.9	7.3	33.4
5	Dejounte Murray	G	6-4	180	9/19/96	Washington	8	31	32.6	.393	.299	.823	6.5	7.4	17.5		9.5	10.8	25.7
24	Jordan Hawkins	G	6-5	190	4/29/02	UConn	2	56	23.6	.372	.331	.816	2.8	1.2	10.8		5.7	2.4	22.0
2	Herbert Jones	F	6-7	206	10/06/98	Alabama	4	20	32.4	.436	.306	.825	3.9	3.3	10.3		5.8	4.8	15.2
15	Jose Alvarado	G	6-0	179	4/12/98	Georgia Tech	4	56	24.4	.392	.359	.811	2.4	4.6	10.3		4.8	9.1	20.3
21	Yves Missi	C	6-11	235	5/14/04	Baylor	1	73	26.8	.547	.000	.623	8.2	1.4	9.1		14.8	2.4	16.3
17	Karlo Matković	F/C	6-10	231	3/30/01	Mega Basket	1	42	18.8	.574	.318	.773	5.0	1.1	7.7		12.7	2.8	19.7
55	Kevon Looney	F	6-9	222	2/06/96	UCLA	10	76	15.0	.514	.400	.566	6.1	1.6	4.5		19.4	5.0	14.5
11	Jaden Springer	G	6-4	202	9/25/02	Tennessee	4	43	8.5	.389	.250	.711	1.3	0.8	2.5		7.6	4.3	14.3
23	Trey Alexander	G	6-4	185	5/02/03	Creighton	1	24	4.9	.317	.176	.750	0.5	0.5	1.3		4.9	4.5	13.1
11	Bryce McGowens	G	6-6	190	11/08/02	Nebraska	3	13	2.5	.286	.000	.833	0.2	0.2	1.0		4.5	3.0	19.5
41	Saddiq Bey	G/F	6-7	215	4/09/99	Villanova	4	Injured — Missed Season											
	Hunter Dickinson	C	7-1	255	11/25/00	Michigan		R — First NBA Season											
0	Jeremiah Fears	G	6-4	190	10/14/06	Oklahoma		R — First NBA Season											
14	Micah Peavy	G/F	6-7	215	7/16/01	Georgetown		R — First NBA Season											
22	Derik Queen	C	6-10	250	12/27/04	Maryland		R — First NBA Season											

DANIEL KUCIN JR. - IMAGN IMAGES



TREY MURPHY III

Jones will get the other starting spot. He’s arguably the best wing defender in the league — “Not on Herb” has become a catch phrase that echoes throughout the state of Louisiana — and he’s developed into a capable 3-point shooter as well. Dumars showed his commitment to him over the summer, signing him to a \$68 million contract extension that goes through 2029.

The Pelicans will also need to carve out minutes for sharpshooter Jordan Hawkins, who is coming off a somewhat disappointing second season in which he didn’t show enough consistency.

FINAL ANALYSIS

New Orleans is in the first stages of changing up its roster, so this team is a bit of a wild card. The Pelicans do have some bright spots. Jones and Murphy comprise one of the best wing duos in the league. Poole looks to be rejuvenating his career. And Murray is an overqualified sixth man whose redundancy and unhappiness with the franchise may make him a trade target when he is slated to return a couple of months into the season.

If Williamson can stay healthy, then the Pelicans should be able to compete for a playoff spot in a tough Western Conference. This team won 49 games two seasons ago while getting 70 games out of him. Last year, Williamson could only suit up for 30 games, and the Pelicans’ win total plummeted to 21. If he suffers his annual season-ending injury, then it will be another rough year.

If the losing continues, head coach Willie Green may not make it through the season. He’s already on the hot seat, with rumors swirling that he’s lost support from his players. Dumars is a Green fan, but another bad year may force his hand.

2025-26 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 22	at Memphis	8:00
Oct. 24	San Antonio	8:00
Oct. 27	Boston	8:00
Oct. 29	at Denver	9:00
Oct. 31	at L.A. Clippers*	10:30

NOVEMBER

Nov. 2	at Oklahoma City	3:30
Nov. 4	Charlotte	8:00
Nov. 5	at Dallas	8:30
Nov. 8	at San Antonio	8:00
Nov. 10	at Phoenix	9:00
Nov. 12	Portland	8:00
Nov. 14	L.A. Lakers*	8:00
Nov. 16	Golden State	7:00
Nov. 17	Oklahoma City	8:00
Nov. 19	Denver	8:00
Nov. 21	at Dallas*	8:30
Nov. 22	Atlanta	7:00
Nov. 24	Chicago	8:00
Nov. 26	Memphis*	8:00
Nov. 29	at Golden State	8:30
Nov. 30	at L.A. Lakers	9:30

DECEMBER

Dec. 2	Minnesota	8:00
Dec. 4	Minnesota	8:00
Dec. 6	at Brooklyn	5:00
Dec. 8	San Antonio	9:30
Dec. 9, 10	Emirates NBA Cup Quarterfinals	
Dec. 13	Emirates NBA Cup Semifinals	
Dec. 16	Emirates NBA Cup Championship	

Dec. 18	Houston	8:00
Dec. 20	Indiana	7:00
Dec. 22	Dallas	8:00
Dec. 23	at Cleveland	7:30
Dec. 26	Phoenix	8:00
Dec. 27	Phoenix	7:00
Dec. 29	New York	8:00
Dec. 31	at Chicago	7:00

JANUARY

Jan. 2	Portland	8:00
Jan. 4	at Miami	6:00
Jan. 6	L.A. Lakers	8:00
Jan. 7	at Atlanta	7:30
Jan. 9	at Washington	7:00
Jan. 11	at Orlando	3:00
Jan. 13	Denver	8:00
Jan. 14	Brooklyn	8:00
Jan. 16	at Indiana	7:00
Jan. 18	at Houston	7:00
Jan. 21	Detroit	8:00
Jan. 23	at Memphis	8:00
Jan. 25	at San Antonio	7:00
Jan. 27	at Oklahoma City	8:00
Jan. 30	Memphis	7:30
Jan. 31	at Philadelphia	7:30

FEBRUARY

Feb. 2	at Charlotte	7:00
Feb. 4	at Milwaukee	8:00
Feb. 6	at Minnesota	8:00
Feb. 9	Sacramento	8:00
Feb. 11	Miami	8:00

Feb. 20	Milwaukee	8:00
Feb. 21	Philadelphia	7:00
Feb. 24	Golden State	8:00
Feb. 26	at Utah	9:00
Feb. 28	at Utah	9:30

MARCH

March 1	at L.A. Clippers	9:00
March 3	at L.A. Lakers	10:30
March 5	at Sacramento	10:00
March 6	at Phoenix	9:00
March 8	Washington	7:00
March 11	Toronto	8:00
March 13	at Houston	8:00
March 16	Dallas	8:00
March 18	L.A. Clippers	8:00
March 19	L.A. Clippers	8:00
March 21	Cleveland	7:00
March 24	at New York	7:30
March 26	at Detroit	7:00
March 27	at Toronto	8:30
March 29	Houston	7:00

APRIL

April 2	at Portland	10:00
April 3	at Sacramento	10:00
April 5	Orlando	7:00
April 7	Utah	8:00
April 10	at Boston	7:30
April 12	at Minnesota	8:30

**Emirates NBA Cup regular-season game
All times Eastern*



SPURS

SOUTHWEST DIVISION PREDICTION: **2ND**

When the Spurs open the 2025-26 NBA season, they will do so with a familiar face notably absent from the bench. Gregg Popovich, who became as synonymous with San Antonio as the Alamo, stepped away from the sidelines after 29 seasons as the Spurs' head coach following a stroke suffered before a game last November.

Mitch Johnson, the 38-year-old former assistant tabbed to replace a living basketball legend, will have his work cut out entering his first full season as head coach. Not only must Johnson attempt to fill the unfillable shoes of the NBA's all-time winningest coach, but he also assumes the helm of a Spurs squad that faces higher expectations than any San Antonio team has in years.

Entering Year 3 of the Victor Wembanyama era, the Spurs are aiming to break a six-season playoff drought that stands as the longest in franchise history. That will be a challenge in a loaded and deep Western Conference.

Wembanyama, the 21-year-old burgeoning superstar of a center, was likely on his way to an All-NBA season before being a blood clot issue sidelined him in February. His return to full health will be vital for what the Spurs have in mind.

So will the return of De'Aaron Fox, the hiccup-quick All-Star guard whom the Spurs acquired from the Sacramento Kings at last season's trade deadline.

Wembanyama appeared in five games with his new marquee running mate before hitting the shelf. Not long after, Fox opted to undergo season-ending surgery on the pinkie finger of his left (shooting) hand to repair a lingering ligament injury. With both Wembanyama and Fox expected to be healthy to start the season, the Spurs hope the pair can quickly develop into one of the NBA's more unstoppable pick-and-roll combos.

That All-Star duo is expected to anchor a young and growing core that includes a cadre of recent lottery picks, including guard Stephon Castle, who followed Wembanyama as the NBA's Rookie of the Year last season, 2025 No. 2 overall pick Dylan Harper and promising holdovers Devin Vassell and Jeremy Sochan.

One of the NBA's youngest rosters will be under the direction of one of the league's youngest head coaches. Johnson played collegiately at Stanford from 2005 to '09, where he was a teammate of Los Angeles Clippers center Brook Lopez. If the Spurs are to return to their old playoff stomping grounds, they are hoping new blood can get them there.

FRONTCOURT

The 7-foot-3 Wembanyama was flying high heading into last season's All-Star break, averaging 24.3 points, 11 rebounds and 3.8 blocks

SCOUTING THE SPURS

ANONYMOUS TAKES FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

"I like their direction, but I'm not sure they're a playoff team yet. Victor Wembanyama at full strength will undoubtedly help toward that end. ... It will be interesting to see how they mix in [second overall pick] Dylan Harper with De'Aaron Fox and Stephon Castle. I wonder if Mitch Johnson will try to use all three at the same time. He occasionally could do that with Wembanyama out there. ... Devin Vassell and Jeremy Sochan are kind of the X-factors here. If they can stay consistent, San Antonio could go places. ... They're young, but I wouldn't sell them short. I think they have all the makings of a dark horse. No one is really talking about them."



DE'AARON FOX

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Record: 33-39	Record: 34-48	Record: 22-60	Record: 22-60	Record: 34-48
Division: 3rd	Division: 4th	Division: 5th	Division: 5th	Division: 4th



BEYOND THE ARC

EMPLOYEE OF THE MONK Victor Wembanyama spent 10 days of his globetrotting offseason at a "spiritual retreat" with Shaolin monks in Zhengzhou, China. There, he studied Chan meditation, Shaolin Kung Fu and traditional Chinese medicine practices. "My goal there was to put my body through things it isn't used to," Wembanyama said on LeBron James' talk show "The Shop."

TOP ROOK IS A CASTLE Stephon Castle became the fourth Spurs player to earn the NBA Rookie of the Year award, joining David Robinson, Tim Duncan and Wembanyama, the previous year's winner. The Spurs became the sixth team in NBA history to boast consecutive ROY winners and the first since Andrew Wiggins and Karl-Anthony Towns for the Minnesota Timberwolves in 2015 and '16.

HOME SWEET HOME De'Aaron Fox did not have to look far to find a tour guide for his new NBA hometown. Fox's wife, the former Recee Caldwell, grew up in San Antonio and was a high school star there before a decorated collegiate career at UCLA, Texas Tech and Cal.

SON OF TITLETOWN The NBA runs in the blood of new head coach Mitch Johnson. His late father, John, logged 12 NBA seasons between 1970 and 1982 with Seattle, Cleveland, Portland and Houston. John Johnson was a two-time All-Star with the Cavaliers and was part of the SuperSonics' only NBA title (1979).



VICTOR WEMBANYAMA

110 | ATHLON SPORTS BASKETBALL



STEPHON CASTLE

guard position that they haven't had since Tony Parker was still wearing silver and black.

Castle will look to build on his Rookie of the Year season by improving his perimeter shooting. His woeful 28.5% mark from deep was the only blemish on a stellar inaugural pro campaign.

The Spurs will bank on a bounce-back season from Vassell, whose fifth NBA season never quite found a groove after he missed all of training camp recovering from foot surgery.

Had it not been for Wembanyama, Harper would have been the most bal-lyhooed rookie to join the Spurs in more than a quarter century. It might not be long before Harper — the former Rutgers star and son of five-time NBA champion Ron Harper — is knocking on the door of the starting lineup.

The Spurs can expect significant contributions off the bench from sharp-shooting swingman Julian Champagnie, as well as veteran Keldon Johnson, who last year averaged 12.7 points per game and set a single-season Spurs record for total points by a reserve (979).

FINAL ANALYSIS

The Spurs increased their win total last season by 12, compiling a 32-45 mark with Johnson in charge (34-48 overall, matching their best record since 2018-19) — and that was with Wembanyama missing half the cam-paign and Fox not joining the team until February (and then missing the end of the season to injury). With those two stars healthy, it would not be surprising to see the club make a similar jump this season. The most obvious obstacle keeping the Spurs from becoming sure-fire playoff contenders is a Western Conference that saw nine teams win at least 40 games last season.

2025-26 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 22	at Dallas	9:30
Oct. 24	at New Orleans	8:00
Oct. 26	Brooklyn	2:00
Oct. 27	Toronto	8:00
Oct. 30	Miami	8:30

NOVEMBER

Nov. 2	at Phoenix	8:00
Nov. 5	at L.A. Lakers	10:00
Nov. 7	Houston*	7:30
Nov. 8	New Orleans	8:00
Nov. 10	at Chicago	8:00
Nov. 12	Golden State	8:00
Nov. 14	Golden State*	9:30
Nov. 16	Sacramento	4:00
Nov. 18	Memphis	8:00
Nov. 20	Atlanta	8:00
Nov. 23	at Phoenix	8:00
Nov. 26	at Portland*	10:00
Nov. 28	at Denver*	9:30
Nov. 30	at Minnesota	7:00

DECEMBER

Dec. 2	Memphis	8:00
Dec. 3	at Orlando	7:00
Dec. 5	at Cleveland	7:30
Dec. 8	at New Orleans	9:30
Dec. 9, 10	Emirates NBA Cup Quarterfinals	
Dec. 13	Emirates NBA Cup Semifinals	
Dec. 16	Emirates NBA Cup Championship	
Dec. 17	Washington	8:00
Dec. 19	at Atlanta	7:30

Dec. 21	at Washington	7:00
Dec. 23	Oklahoma City	8:30
Dec. 25	at Oklahoma City	2:30
Dec. 27	Utah	8:00
Dec. 29	Cleveland	8:00
Dec. 31	New York	7:00

JANUARY

Jan. 2	at Indiana	7:00
Jan. 3	Portland	8:00
Jan. 6	at Memphis	8:00
Jan. 7	L.A. Lakers	7:30
Jan. 10	at Boston	8:00
Jan. 11	at Minnesota	7:00
Jan. 13	at Oklahoma City	8:00
Jan. 15	Milwaukee	8:00
Jan. 17	Minnesota	8:00
Jan. 19	Utah	8:00
Jan. 20	at Houston	8:00
Jan. 22	at Utah	9:00
Jan. 25	New Orleans	7:00
Jan. 28	at Houston	9:30
Jan. 31	at Charlotte	3:00

FEBRUARY

Feb. 1	Orlando	4:00
Feb. 4	Oklahoma City	9:30
Feb. 5	at Dallas	8:30
Feb. 7	Dallas	6:00
Feb. 10	at L.A. Lakers	10:30
Feb. 11	at Golden State	10:00
Feb. 19	Phoenix	8:30
Feb. 21	Sacramento	8:00

Feb. 23	at Detroit	7:00
Feb. 25	at Toronto	7:30
Feb. 26	at Brooklyn	7:30

MARCH

March 1	at New York	1:00
March 3	at Philadelphia	8:00
March 5	Detroit	8:00
March 6	L.A. Clippers	9:30
March 8	Houston	8:00
March 10	Boston	8:00
March 12	Denver	9:00
March 14	Charlotte	8:00
March 16	at L.A. Clippers	10:30
March 17	at Sacramento	11:00
March 19	Phoenix	8:00
March 21	Indiana	8:00
March 23	at Miami	7:30
March 25	at Memphis	8:00
March 28	at Milwaukee	3:00
March 30	Chicago	8:00

APRIL

April 1	at Golden State	10:00
April 2	at L.A. Clippers	10:30
April 4	at Denver	3:00
April 6	Philadelphia	8:00
April 8	Portland	8:00
April 10	Dallas	8:00
April 12	Denver	8:30

*Emirates NBA Cup regular-season game
All times Eastern



DEN NUGGETS

NORTHWEST DIVISION PREDICTION: **2ND**

The Denver Nuggets made a strong push last spring, taking the eventual champion Oklahoma City Thunder to seven games in the second round before finally running out of gas. The fact that they did it with almost no bench production spoke volumes about the starting group — and about Nikola Jokić’s ability to make everything run. Jokić remains the NBA’s most unhurried superstar, seemingly immune to pressure while picking teams apart in ways that feel inevitable. His scoring, passing and decision-making turn Denver’s offense into a clinic.

This summer, the Nuggets upgraded around him. They swapped Michael Porter Jr. for Cameron Johnson, a more consistent shooter who doesn’t need the ball to make an impact. The addition of Jonas Valančiūnas gives them a physical, skilled backup big. Bruce Brown returned in free agency, bringing the energy, defense and versatility that they have sorely missed since his departure in 2023. The moves signal Denver’s intent to win now, and win big.

David Adelman, who was promoted after a playoff run that impressed both team ownership and Jokić himself, takes over as head coach for Michael Malone, stunningly dismissed just before the playoffs. Adelman’s calm, steady approach mirrors that of the Nuggets’ star and could be the voice this roster needs for another deep run. His coaching style emphasizes spacing and ball movement, using Jokić as the primary hub but keeping all five players engaged offensively. On defense, he leans on Aaron Gordon’s versatility and schemes designed to keep opponents out of the paint, with length and communication to handle the perimeter.

FRONTCOURT

Jokić, Gordon, and Johnson form a balanced and dangerous starting trio. Jokić does it all — facilitate from the high post, score on the block, knock down 3-pointers and dominate the glass. Gordon is the defensive anchor, guarding the opponent’s best forward while scoring efficiently on cuts and in transition. Johnson’s role is clear: space the floor, hit open 3s and defend his position. His quick release and ability to work off pin-down screens should give Jokić an easy outlet whenever defenses collapse.

Valančiūnas brings legitimate size and rebounding behind Jokić, something that the Nuggets lacked last season. He can score inside and control the boards, allowing Adelman to buy Jokić rest without completely altering the offensive structure.

DaRon Holmes II, a first-round pick in 2024 who is finally healthy after missing his rookie season, offers length and mobility in

SCOUTING THE NUGGETS

ANONYMOUS TAKES
FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

“Boy, did they do a nice job of filling out the bench with not much to work with. ... Cameron Johnson is probably an upgrade over Michael Porter Jr. He will really open things up for Nikola Jokić. ... I’m still waiting for Jamal Murray to be an All-Star. He’s right there. But he’s still just a hint too streaky. ... The emergence of Christian Braun needs to continue. As great as Jokić is, they need a little less of him and more of the other guys. ... Hopefully, for their sake, he’ll get more rest because of the Jonas Valančiūnas addition. ... I think that overall this is a better team than the one that won the title (in 2023).”



JAMAL
MURRAY

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Record: 47-25 Division: 2nd	Record: 48-34 Division: 2nd	Record: 53-29 Division: 1st	Record: 57-25 Division: 2nd	Record: 50-32 Division: 2nd



BEYOND THE ARC

BROWN BACK IN THE MIX Bruce Brown's return is more than a nostalgia play. Denver missed his energy, defense and ability to fill multiple roles since his departure in 2023. Expect him to be one of the first players off the bench.

CAM'S CLEAN FIT Cameron Johnson replaces Michael Porter Jr. in the starting lineup. Johnson's quick release and willingness to defend make him a seamless partner for Nikola Jokić. His ability to space the floor could quietly boost Murray's production as well.

VALANČIŪNAS INSURANCE Jokić rarely misses games, but now Denver has a capable backup in Jonas Valančiūnas. He brings rebounding, post scoring and enough passing to keep the Nuggets' offense steady when Jokić rests.

ADELMAN'S STAMP David Adelman's promotion from interim to head coach was met with Jokić's public approval. Adelman's calm sideline demeanor and willingness to adapt lineups could prove valuable during the grind of the regular season.

HOLMES' LONG-AWAITED DEBUT Second-year big DaRon Holmes II missed all of last season with an Achilles injury. Now healthy, he brings size, mobility and a chance to carve out a role behind Jokić and Valančiūnas.



NIKOLA JOKIĆ

reserve minutes. His ability to defend the pick-and-roll and finish around the rim could earn him steady time. Julian Strawther and Zeke Nnaji will compete for time at the forward spots, while Peyton Watson’s athleticism and defensive instincts should keep him in the mix.

In other words, it appears the Nuggets can now counter the size of Western Conference rivals like Oklahoma City and the Minnesota Timberwolves without sacrificing offense. In the past, they often went small when Jokić sat, hoping to survive those minutes. With Valančiūnas and Holmes, they can keep a legitimate interior presence on the floor at all times.

And it could get really interesting if Adelman ever employs a lineup of Jokić and Valančiūnas together. Not likely a regular occurrence, but something that could occasionally give Denver a dominant duo on the blocks.

BACKCOURT

Jamal Murray remains the second star and primary closer. His ability to hit big shots, operate in the two-man game with Jokić and control the pace in crunch time makes him indispensable. Murray’s chemistry with Jokić has evolved into one of the most dangerous partnerships in the league, with each player able to anticipate the other’s moves without a word.

Christian Braun moved into a full-time starting role after showing growth as a two-way player. He defends and runs the floor, and he has started to hit shots more consistently, giving Denver another option who doesn’t need high usage to contribute. The good news for the Nuggets is that he still appears to be on the rise.

Brown’s return gives Denver a proven, play-off-tested guard who can defend multiple positions, push the tempo and chip in offensively without disrupting the flow. Newcomer Tim Hardaway Jr. adds another scoring option off the bench, a boost to the second units that struggle to generate offense. Beyond that, true point guard depth is a concern. Murray is the only natural floor leader, which means Brown or even Jokić may have to initiate offense when he sits. That’s never been a problem for Jokić, but Denver’s goal is to decrease his regular-season usage.

Rotation spots behind the starters are up for

////

50

Denver has posted 50 or more wins in three straight seasons. The talent is in place to surpass that mark again, but for a team this good, the regular season is just the setup. The real measure will come in the postseason.



Cameron Johnson ////

OFFSEASON MOVES

The Nuggets focused entirely on proven NBA talent this summer. Cameron Johnson arrived via trade to replace Michael Porter Jr., giving Denver a more consistent shooter and defender on the wing. Jonas Valančiūnas is a true backup center who can rebound, score inside and keep the offense steady when Nikola Jokić rests. Bruce Brown returned in free agency to reprise the versatile, high-energy role he played during the 2023 title run, while Tim Hardaway Jr. adds perimeter scoring to a bench that lacked punch last season. The team also views this as the true rookie year for DaRon Holmes II, who missed all of last season with an Achilles injury but is now fully healthy and ready to contribute.

ROSTER										2024-25 STATISTICS							48-MINUTE PRODUCTIVITY		
HEAD COACH: DAVID ADELMAN (2ND SEASON; CAREER: 3-0)																			
#	PLAYER	POS	HT	WT	DOB	FROM	YRS	G	MPG	FG%	3P%	FT%	RPG	APG	PPG		REB	AST	PTS
15	Nikola Jokić	C	6-11	284	2/19/95	Mega Basket	10	70	36.7	.576	.417	.800	12.7	10.2	29.6		16.7	13.4	38.7
27	Jamal Murray	G	6-4	215	2/23/97	Kentucky	8	67	36.1	.474	.393	.886	3.9	6.0	21.4		5.2	8.0	28.5
23	Cameron Johnson	F	6-8	210	3/03/96	North Carolina	6	57	31.6	.475	.390	.893	4.3	3.4	18.8		6.6	5.2	28.5
0	Christian Braun	G	6-6	220	4/17/01	Kansas	3	79	33.9	.580	.397	.827	5.2	2.6	15.4		7.4	3.7	21.9
32	Aaron Gordon	F	6-8	235	9/16/95	Arizona	11	51	28.4	.531	.436	.810	4.8	3.2	14.7		8.2	5.4	24.8
10	Tim Hardaway Jr.	G/F	6-5	205	3/16/92	Michigan	12	77	28.0	.406	.368	.855	2.4	1.6	11.0		4.1	2.7	18.8
17	Jonas Valančiūnas	C	6-11	265	5/06/92	Lietuvos rytas Vilnius	13	81	18.8	.550	.216	.879	7.7	2.0	10.4		19.8	5.2	26.6
3	Julian Strawther	G	6-6	205	4/18/02	Gonzaga	2	65	21.3	.432	.349	.822	2.2	1.3	9.0		4.9	2.9	20.4
11	Bruce Brown	G/F	6-4	202	8/15/96	Miami (Fla.)	7	41	22.5	.421	.333	.815	4.0	2.0	8.3		8.5	4.4	17.7
8	Peyton Watson	G	6-7	200	9/11/02	UCLA	3	68	24.3	.477	.353	.693	3.4	1.4	8.1		6.8	2.7	16.0
24	Jalen Pickett	G	6-2	202	10/22/99	Penn State	2	49	13.6	.428	.396	.750	1.4	2.2	4.1		5.1	7.7	14.4
22	Zeke Nnaji	F/C	6-9	240	1/09/01	Arizona	5	57	10.7	.496	.327	.614	1.6	0.4	3.2		7.1	1.8	14.5
5	Hunter Tyson	F	6-8	215	6/13/00	Clemson	2	51	7.8	.375	.311	.750	1.5	0.4	2.6		9.4	2.4	16.1
21	Spencer Jones	F	6-7	225	6/14/01	Stanford	1	20	6.2	.324	.059	1.000	0.9	0.3	1.3		6.5	1.9	10.0
	Tamar Bates	G	6-5	195	2/21/03	Missouri													
14	DaRon Holmes II	F	6-10	225	8/15/02	Dayton													
	Curtis Jones	G	6-4	195	10/04/01	Iowa State													
										R — First NBA Season									
										Injured — Missed Season									
										R — First NBA Season									



AARON GORDON

grabs. Hardaway’s shooting will be valuable, while Watson’s defense and Strawther’s energy could also earn them situational roles. Succeeding in the West will mean developing a second unit that can hold or extend leads, especially against deep teams like Oklahoma City, Minnesota and the Houston Rockets.

FINAL ANALYSIS

The Nuggets have arguably the best player in the league and a roster that finally looks deeper than last season’s group. Jokić and Murray give them a championship foundation. Gordon’s defense, Johnson’s shooting and Brown’s return all point toward a team that is capable of coming out of the Western Conference. Valančiūnas and Holmes bolster the bench, while Adelman has the trust of his star and the momentum of a strong playoff showing.

Denver’s challenge will be integrating new faces without losing the chemistry that has carried the team through the past four seasons. The Nuggets will also need to keep Murray healthy and find ways to limit Jokić’s minutes without sacrificing wins in the standings. The regular season will be about locking in playoff seeding, but the true test will come in May.

If the bench holds up and the starting five stays intact, the Nuggets have every reason to believe that another NBA Finals trip is within their reach. In a loaded conference, their margin for error is slim. But with Jokić at the center, Denver will begin the season as one of the most feared teams in basketball.

On paper, the Nuggets have it all — a true superstar, veteran depth and a core that’s been there before. They clearly enter the season with more weapons than last year, and they have as much of a chance to win it all as anyone.

2025-26 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 23	at Golden State	10:00
Oct. 25	Phoenix	9:00
Oct. 27	at Minnesota	9:30
Oct. 29	New Orleans	9:00
Oct. 31	at Portland*	10:00

NOVEMBER

Nov. 3	Sacramento	9:00
Nov. 5	Miami	9:00
Nov. 7	Golden State*	10:00
Nov. 8	Indiana	9:00
Nov. 11	at Sacramento	11:00
Nov. 12	at L.A. Clippers	10:30
Nov. 15	at Minnesota	8:00
Nov. 17	Chicago	9:00
Nov. 19	at New Orleans	8:00
Nov. 21	at Houston*	9:30
Nov. 22	Sacramento	9:00
Nov. 24	at Memphis	8:00
Nov. 28	San Antonio*	9:30
Nov. 29	at Phoenix	9:00

DECEMBER

Dec. 1	Dallas	9:00
Dec. 3	at Indiana	7:00
Dec. 5	at Atlanta	7:30
Dec. 7	at Charlotte	6:00
Dec. 9, 10	Emirates NBA Cup Quarterfinals	
Dec. 13	Emirates NBA Cup Semifinals	
Dec. 16	Emirates NBA Cup Championship	
Dec. 18	Orlando	9:00
Dec. 20	Houston	5:00

Dec. 22	Utah	9:00
Dec. 23	at Dallas	8:00
Dec. 25	Minnesota	10:30
Dec. 27	at Orlando	7:00
Dec. 29	at Miami	7:30
Dec. 31	at Toronto	7:30

JANUARY

Jan. 2	at Cleveland	7:30
Jan. 4	at Brooklyn	3:30
Jan. 5	at Philadelphia	8:30
Jan. 7	at Boston	7:30
Jan. 9	Atlanta	9:00
Jan. 11	Milwaukee	8:00
Jan. 13	at New Orleans	8:00
Jan. 14	at Dallas	9:30
Jan. 17	Washington	9:00
Jan. 18	Charlotte	8:00
Jan. 20	L.A. Lakers	10:00
Jan. 22	at Washington	7:00
Jan. 23	at Milwaukee	8:00
Jan. 25	at Memphis	3:30
Jan. 27	Detroit	9:00
Jan. 29	Brooklyn	9:00
Jan. 30	L.A. Clippers	10:00

FEBRUARY

Feb. 1	Oklahoma City	9:30
Feb. 3	at Detroit	7:00
Feb. 4	at New York	7:00
Feb. 7	at Chicago	8:00
Feb. 9	Cleveland	9:00
Feb. 11	Memphis	10:00

Feb. 19	at L.A. Clippers	10:30
Feb. 20	at Portland	10:00
Feb. 22	at Golden State	3:30
Feb. 25	Boston	10:00
Feb. 27	at Oklahoma City	9:30

MARCH

March 1	Minnesota	3:30
March 2	at Utah	9:00
March 5	L.A. Lakers	10:00
March 6	New York	9:00
March 9	at Oklahoma City	7:30
March 11	Houston	10:00
March 12	at San Antonio	9:00
March 14	at L.A. Lakers	8:30
March 17	Philadelphia	9:00
March 20	Toronto	9:00
March 22	Portland	5:00
March 24	at Phoenix	11:00
March 25	Dallas	10:00
March 27	Utah	9:00
March 29	Golden State	10:00

APRIL

April 1	at Utah	9:00
April 4	San Antonio	3:00
April 6	Portland	9:00
April 8	Memphis	9:00
April 10	Oklahoma City	10:00
April 12	at San Antonio	8:30

*Emirates NBA Cup regular-season game
All times Eastern



MTN T-WOLVES

NORTHWEST DIVISION PREDICTION: 3RD

As the Minnesota Timberwolves walked off the court following Game 5 of the Western Conference finals in Oklahoma City, a question lingered: Was this the peak? In a Western Conference that's somehow still improving, can Minnesota take the requisite steps to not merely knock on the door of a championship, but kick it down?

Its path appears to be internal improvement. While the Denver Nuggets and Houston Rockets re-tooled via some splash moves this summer in their attempts to chase down the Thunder, Minnesota's maneuvers were all focused on keeping its core together.

Everyone returns from last year's rotation sans Nickeil Alexander-Walker. Great. Tim Connelly, Minnesota's president of basketball operations, firmly believes that if you reach the conference finals, you're a title contender. But Minnesota clearly wasn't in Oklahoma City's class last spring. Can it be now with a similar group of players?

That will be dependent on the powers of continuity and internal development. Jaden McDaniels and Anthony Edwards are all still in their mid-20s, have yet to reach their primes as players and have shown growth with each passing season. Edwards was back in the weight room at the team's practice facility just 32 hours post elimination in June, and he appears to be on a mission to join the NBA's true elite.

Julius Randle and Donte DiVincenzo will be in their second year in head coach Chris Finch's system after arriving on the eve of training camp last fall. Minnesota played some of its best basketball down the stretch of the campaign and into the playoffs.

Plus, the last time the Wolves "ran it back" without making any major offseason transactions, the result was a 56-win 2023-24 campaign and a Western Conference finals appearance.

So there are reasons for optimism that the same group can indeed be better. But at the same time, key players such as Mike Conley (who turns 38 in October) and Rudy Gobert (33) aren't getting any younger, and their play is likely to decline.

So Minnesota's championship hopes are hanging at least partially on the bets they've made on younger players such as Rob Dillingham, Terrence Shannon Jr. and Jaylen Clark. While there are potential success stories there, those players have to make massive leaps to be relied upon when it truly counts.

And should Gobert and/or Conley decline at all, others will have to pick up the slack in what were already areas of deficiency — consistency, maturity and decision-making.

SCOUTING THE T-WOLVES

ANONYMOUS TAKES
FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

"People don't give them enough credit for reaching back-to-back Western Conference finals. This is a team on the cusp. ... Anthony Edwards is amazing. I can't get enough of watching the guy play. But he could still use a consistent sidekick. ... Julius Randle had a fine season.

They'll need more of the same. Or better. ... They do seem to have all the pieces — a real superstar, great defense at the rim in Rudy Gobert, solid depth. But they still seem to be missing something when it comes to winning a championship. I just can't put my finger on what that is. ... Chris Finch has a great relationship with Edwards, and having a head coach and star player seeing eye-to-eye counts for a lot."



RUDY
GOBERT

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Record: 23-49	Record: 46-36	Record: 42-40	Record: 56-26	Record: 49-33
Division: 4th	Division: 3rd	Division: 2nd	Division: 3rd	Division: 3rd



BEYOND THE ARC

CHAMPIONSHIP PURSUIT

Mike Conley was part of a stout 2007 draft class that included Kevin Durant, Al Horford and Jeff Green — all top-five picks who are still playing in the NBA. Horford and Green finally got their rings in recent years. But Conley's hopes seem to dim with each passing season. "The key is get there as many times (as possible), and it's very hard to do," head coach Chris Finch said at the end of last season. "Maybe it works out for Mike in a different way. Maybe he wins one as a coach, maybe he wins one as a general manager. There's a lot of things that can happen for you in your future, but we're going to keep battling for him and for the organization."

MATURING ANT? Minnesota will likely mature as a team when its superstar, whose off-court activity is prone to attracting tabloid headlines, does so. Anthony Edwards was fined \$420,000 by the NBA last season for various violations, and he was suspended a game (and nearly two) for accruing too many technical fouls.

NEW OWNER EFFECT Marc Lore and Alex Rodriguez officially assumed majority ownership of the Timberwolves this offseason. That transition could lead to big changes from a business perspective — they're rolling out a new ticketing platform, and the prospect of a new arena is a constant point of discussion — but with final say now theirs, will Lore and Rodriguez shake up the roster? Their initial comments suggest otherwise, with the ownership duo touting the prospect of roster continuity while expressing a willingness to pay the luxury tax.



ANTHONY EDWARDS



JULIUS RANDLE

something he wasn't able to do as a rookie? While Dillingham had bright spots in the 2025 Summer League campaign, he again largely shined as a scorer.

That's not to say Minnesota doesn't need his scoring. The Thunder exposed the Wolves' lack of perimeter threats beyond Edwards in the conference finals.

There's hope for Shannon to become a consistent scorer off the bench. He is Minnesota's best transition threat and plays with a physicality that the Wolves need.

DiVincenzo could take another leap toward being that 17-18 points-per-game guy off the pine as Minnesota unlocks more ways to generate opportunities for the sharpshooter.

But a sneaky name to watch is Clark, who brings the defensive physicality that is the calling card of the best version of these Wolves. Should a return to that form be deemed necessary in Minnesota, more minutes for the wing stopper would figure to be in order.

FINAL ANALYSIS

The Timberwolves are built well for long-term success, and it does feel as though Edwards provides a high floor for years to come. This is a playoff team once again, and it will be a tough out. But the reality is that Minnesota was a 49-win team last season that benefited from a Steph Curry injury en route to another conference finals appearance, and climbing additional rungs up the ladder this season seems unlikely unless Minnesota recaptures the defensive dominance it displayed two seasons ago, when the Wolves appeared to be a hungrier pack.

2025-26 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 22	at Portland	10:00
Oct. 24	at L.A. Lakers	10:00
Oct. 26	Indiana	7:00
Oct. 27	Denver	9:30
Oct. 29	L.A. Lakers	9:30

NOVEMBER

Nov. 1	at Charlotte	6:00
Nov. 3	at Brooklyn	7:00
Nov. 5	at New York	7:30
Nov. 7	Utah*	8:00
Nov. 9	at Sacramento	9:00
Nov. 10	at Utah	9:00
Nov. 14	Sacramento*	8:00
Nov. 15	Denver	8:00
Nov. 17	Dallas	8:00
Nov. 19	Washington	8:00
Nov. 21	at Phoenix*	9:00
Nov. 24	at Sacramento	10:00
Nov. 26	at Oklahoma City*	7:30
Nov. 29	Boston	5:00
Nov. 30	San Antonio	7:00

DECEMBER

Dec. 2	at New Orleans	8:00
Dec. 4	at New Orleans	8:00
Dec. 6	L.A. Clippers	8:00
Dec. 8	Phoenix	8:00
Dec. 9, 10	Emirates NBA Cup Quarterfinals	
Dec. 13	Emirates NBA Cup Semifinals	
Dec. 16	Emirates NBA Cup Championship	
Dec. 17	Memphis	8:00

Dec. 19	Oklahoma City	9:30
Dec. 21	Milwaukee	7:00
Dec. 23	New York	8:00
Dec. 25	at Denver	10:30
Dec. 27	Brooklyn	8:00
Dec. 29	at Chicago	8:00
Dec. 31	at Atlanta	3:00

JANUARY

Jan. 3	at Miami	5:00
Jan. 4	at Washington	6:00
Jan. 6	Miami	8:00
Jan. 8	Cleveland	8:00
Jan. 10	at Cleveland	1:00
Jan. 11	San Antonio	7:00
Jan. 13	at Milwaukee	8:00
Jan. 16	at Houston	9:30
Jan. 17	at San Antonio	8:00
Jan. 20	at Utah	9:00
Jan. 22	Chicago	8:00
Jan. 24	Golden State	5:30
Jan. 26	Golden State	9:30
Jan. 28	at Dallas	8:30
Jan. 29	Oklahoma City	9:30
Jan. 31	at Memphis	8:00

FEBRUARY

Feb. 2	at Memphis	9:30
Feb. 4	at Toronto	7:30
Feb. 6	New Orleans	8:00
Feb. 8	L.A. Clippers	3:00
Feb. 9	Atlanta	8:00
Feb. 11	Portland	8:00

Feb. 20	Dallas	7:30
Feb. 22	Philadelphia	7:00
Feb. 24	at Portland	11:00
Feb. 26	at L.A. Clippers	10:00

MARCH

March 1	at Denver	3:30
March 3	Memphis	8:00
March 5	Toronto	8:00
March 7	Orlando	3:00
March 10	at L.A. Lakers	11:00
March 11	at L.A. Clippers	10:30
March 13	at Golden State	10:00
March 15	at Oklahoma City	1:00
March 17	Phoenix	8:00
March 18	Utah	8:00
March 20	Portland	8:00
March 22	at Boston	8:00
March 25	Houston	9:30
March 28	Detroit	8:00
March 30	at Dallas	8:30

APRIL

April 2	at Detroit	7:00
April 3	at Philadelphia	7:00
April 5	Charlotte	7:00
April 7	at Indiana	8:00
April 8	at Orlando	7:00
April 10	at Houston	8:00
April 12	New Orleans	8:30

**Emirates NBA Cup regular-season game
All times Eastern*



OKC THUNDER

NORTHWEST DIVISION PREDICTION: 1ST

The Oklahoma City Thunder enter the 2025-26 season trying to snap a seven-year drought. That's how long it's been since the NBA has had a repeat champion — the Golden State Warriors of 2016-17 and '17-18. "We have to keep pressing on," Thunder general manager Sam Presti said after last season, "and the odds are clearly stacked against us being here again next year."

Presti's protests aside, the Thunder are heavily favored to not only win the Western Conference again, but also to repeat as champs. All of the key figures are back — a cohesion that connects the ownership group to the front office to the coaching staff to the players.

The Thunder's Big Three — reigning MVP Shai Gilgeous-Alexander, Jalen Williams and Chet Holmgren — all signed contract extensions over the summer. SGA is entering his age-27 season. Williams, 24, and Holmgren, 23, have yet to enter their primes, which is saying something given that J-Dub was a third-team All-NBA selection a season ago. Health is the only thing that's held Holmgren back from an All-NBA nod of his own.

Gilgeous-Alexander, who joined Steve Nash as the second Canadian ever to win MVP, has solidified his place as the second-best player in the NBA behind only Denver's Nikola Jokić. He's a no-nonsense superstar, one who embodies the ethos of OKC's buttoned-up organization. SGA, whose initials are now synonymous with OKC, is still improving, adding to his game every summer.

OKC is more than SGA and the Big Three. The top-12 Thunder players in total minutes from a season ago are back. Seldom-used rookie Dillon Jones — traded to the Washington Wizards — was the only standard-contract player the Thunder lost. Jones was dealt to make room for Thomas Sorber, the center from Georgetown whom the Thunder selected with the 15th pick in the 2025 NBA Draft.

Elsewhere in the Western Conference, the Houston Rockets made a splash in acquiring Kevin Durant, the Denver Nuggets added depth and the Minnesota Timberwolves made moves along the margins. Each of those contenders is chasing OKC, which was content in maintaining the status quo. But don't confuse the status quo for complacency. There's plenty of room for improvement within.

FRONTCOURT

The Holmgren/Isaiah Hartenstein tandem is still a work in progress. The two centers started alongside each other in 20 of the Thunder's 23 playoff games after playing in only 20 regular-season games together. First Hartenstein was hurt, and then Holmgren missed three

SCOUTING THE THUNDER

ANONYMOUS TAKES FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

"Man, were they allowed to get away with a lot. They turned the playoffs into hand-to-hand combat. ... I don't say that as a criticism. It's more out of admiration. ... Shai Gilgeous-Alexander is an MVP who should be celebrated. He's a good dude and brought back the mid-range game.

You watch — teams are going to start emulating the Thunder like they used to do the Warriors. ... Jalen Williams is perhaps the NBA's most underrated player. ... Nobody knew Mark Daigneault before he came here, but he may be the best coach in the league.

... Alex Caruso and Isaiah Hartenstein were massive pickups. ... They can win it all again and again."



JALEN WILLIAMS

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Record: 22-50	Record: 24-58	Record: 40-42	Record: 57-25	Record: 68-14
Division: 5th	Division: 5th	Division: 3rd	Division: 1st	Division: 1st



SHAI GILGEOUS-ALEXANDER

BEYOND THE ARC

UNHAPPY HOMECOMING? The NBA succeeded in drumming up drama by scheduling the Houston Rockets featuring Kevin Durant as the Thunder's opponent on opening night — ring night. Thunder fans have still not gotten over Durant's decision to leave OKC for the Golden State Warriors in the summer of 2016.

CLASS BY HIMSELF Kentucky has produced more than 100 NBA players. Shai Gilgeous-Alexander is the first to win an NBA MVP. He was the third Thunder player to win MVP honors, joining Durant and Russell Westbrook. SGA will try to repeat as MVP, a feat accomplished by six players this century: Nikola Jokić, Giannis Antetokounmpo, Stephen Curry, LeBron James (twice), Steve Nash and Tim Duncan.

HOME FOR THE HOLIDAY The Thunder will host the San Antonio Spurs on Christmas. It will be the Thunder's first Christmas game since 2018 and the first time OKC has hosted on the holiday since 2017. OKC played on Christmas every year from 2010 to 2018. Christmas, by the way, is Thomas Sorber's birthday. The rookie was born on Dec. 25, 2005.

NEW HOME The Thunder will be moving into a new arena ahead of the 2028-29 season. Plans for the new \$1 billion arena — which will be built directly north of Paycom Center — were unveiled this summer. Paycom Center opened in 2002, six years before the Seattle SuperSonics relocated to Oklahoma City.

OKLAHOMA CITY THUNDER

months with a broken hip — injuries that delayed the Thunder from deploying the double-big lineup.

How head coach Mark Daigneault handles the frontcourt rotation will be fascinating to watch. The best guess is that both bigs start, but Holmgren has looked most comfortable when he's been the lone big on the court — lineups that swap Hartenstein for the likes of Cason Wallace or Alex Caruso.

Hartenstein, the biggest free-agent signee in Thunder history, is under contract for \$28.5 million this season, with a team option for 2026-27. Given the impending salary crunch the Thunder are certain to face, it's thought that Hartenstein might be one of the first key players Presti and his front office have to move. That's a worry for next offseason, though. Hartenstein remains firmly in the plans for the 2025-26 season.

Sorber is a possible Hartenstein replacement when that time comes. As is Jaylin Williams, the Thunder's third-team center who could also play alongside Holmgren and Hartenstein in certain lineups given the threat he poses from 3-point range. Sorber is more of an old-school center who defends and rebounds, but he has the passing chops, like Hartenstein, to be an offensive hub in the high post.

Veteran forward Kenrich Williams, who can size up as a small-ball center or play as a bigger wing, is a utility knife for Daigneault. He's also one of the team's leaders, arguably the most respected player in the locker room.

BACKCOURT

No surprises here. Gilgeous-Alexander, Jalen Williams and Lu Dort will start. That leaves defensive terrors Wallace and Caruso as top options off the bench.

Caruso is who he is at 31. He might have been the Thunder's third-most impactful player during the playoffs. Look for the Thunder to manage his minutes in the regular season.

Wallace, meanwhile, had a shaky playoffs, particularly on the offensive end. How Wallace develops in Year 3 is one of the most intriguing storylines for the Thunder. Will he hunt his shot

38

That's how many games per season Chet Holmgren has averaged during his three-year career. He missed the entire 2022-23 season with a right foot injury. Then he played in all 82 games of the 2023-24 season. Then last season, a hip injury limited Holmgren to 32 games. Holmgren's continued development depends on his health. Luckily for the Thunder, Holmgren has yet to miss a playoff game.



Thomas Sorber

OFFSEASON MOVES

DRAFT PICKS

1 THOMAS SORBER

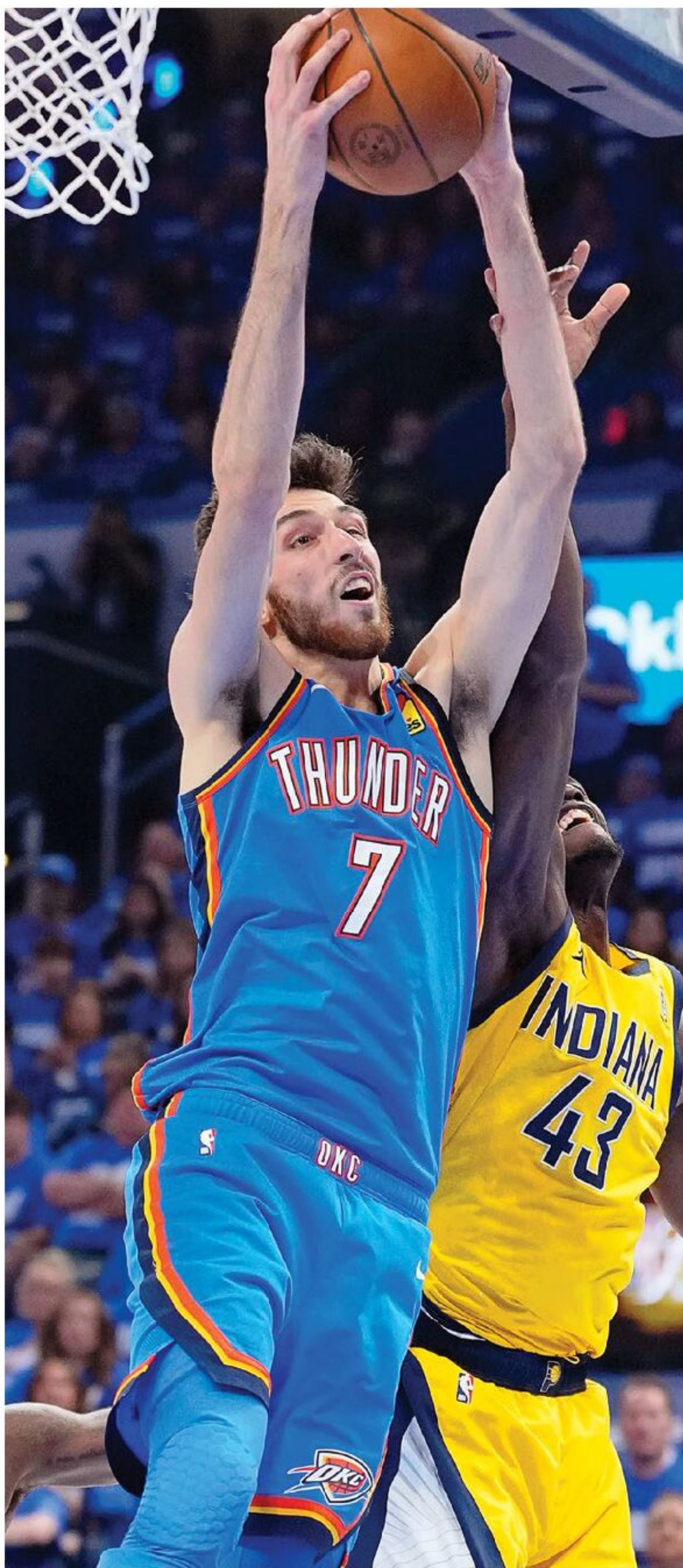
C, 6-10, 250, Georgetown

2 BROOKS BARNHIZER

G, 6-6, 230, Northwestern

OKC selected Georgetown center Thomas Sorber with the No. 15 overall pick. Sorber is a throwback big, specializing in defending and rebounding. He's not overly athletic, but he's seen as a player with good instincts on both sides of the court. Barnhizer is a rangy wing who profiles as a defensive specialist. He needs to develop a jump shot to round out his game, but Barnhizer is just the kind of try-hard player the Thunder loves — think Lu Dort, Alex Caruso, Kenrich Williams. OKC was happy to take a flier on him in the second round. Neither Sorber nor Barnhizer is expected to make much of an impact this season.

ROSTER							2024-25 STATISTICS										48-MINUTE PRODUCTIVITY		
HEAD COACH: MARK DAIGNEAULT (6TH SEASON; CAREER: 211-189)																			
#	PLAYER	POS	HT	WT	DOB	FROM	YRS	G	MPG	FG%	3P%	FT%	RPG	APG	PPG		REB	AST	PTS
2	S. Gilgeous-Alexander	G	6-6	195	7/12/98	Kentucky	7	76	34.2	.519	.375	.898	5.0	6.4	32.7		7.0	9.0	45.9
8	Jalen Williams	G/F	6-5	211	4/14/01	Santa Clara	3	69	32.4	.484	.365	.789	5.3	5.1	21.6		7.9	7.6	32.0
7	Chet Holmgren	C/F	7-1	208	5/01/02	Gonzaga	2	32	27.4	.490	.379	.754	8.0	2.0	15.0		14.1	3.4	26.2
21	Aaron Wiggins	G	6-5	190	1/02/99	Maryland	4	76	22.9	.488	.383	.831	3.9	1.8	12.0		8.1	3.7	25.2
55	Isaiah Hartenstein	C/F	7-0	250	5/05/98	Zalgiris	7	57	27.9	.581	.000	.675	10.7	3.8	11.2		18.4	6.6	19.2
11	Isaiah Joe	G	6-3	165	7/02/99	Arkansas	5	74	21.7	.440	.412	.821	2.6	1.6	10.2		5.9	3.6	22.6
5	Luguentz Dort	G	6-4	220	4/19/99	Arizona State	6	71	29.2	.435	.412	.717	4.1	1.6	10.1		6.8	2.7	16.6
22	Cason Wallace	G	6-3	195	11/07/03	Kentucky	2	68	27.6	.474	.356	.811	3.4	2.5	8.4		5.9	4.4	14.5
9	Alex Caruso	G	6-5	186	2/28/94	Texas A&M	8	54	19.3	.446	.353	.824	2.9	2.5	7.1		7.3	6.3	17.6
25	Ajay Mitchell	G	6-5	190	6/25/02	UC-Santa Barbara	1	36	16.6	.495	.383	.829	1.9	1.8	6.5		5.5	5.1	18.8
34	Kenrich Williams	G/F	6-6	210	12/02/94	TCU	7	69	16.4	.483	.386	.718	3.5	1.4	6.3		10.2	4.1	18.5
6	Jaylin Williams	F	6-9	240	6/29/02	Arkansas	3	47	16.7	.439	.399	.767	5.6	2.6	5.9		16.0	7.3	17.0
13	Ousmane Dieng	F	6-9	185	5/21/03	New Zealand Breakers	3	37	10.9	.432	.324	.688	2.2	0.8	3.8		9.6	3.7	16.8
15	Branden Carlson	C	7-0	220	6/14/99	Utah	1	32	7.7	.443	.333	.778	1.7	0.4	3.8		10.5	2.7	23.8
17	Malevy Leons	F	6-9	210	9/23/99	Bradley	1	6	3.5	.000	.000	.500	0.5	0.2	0.3		6.9	2.3	4.6
23	Brooks Barnhizer	G	6-6	230	3/02/02	Northwestern				R — First NBA Season									
12	Thomas Sorber	C	6-10	250	12/25/05	Georgetown				R — First NBA Season									
44	Nikola Topic	G	6-6	200	8/10/05	Crvena zvezda				R — First NBA Season									



CHET HOLMGREN

more? Wallace was one of the most passive players on the team. Will he take a step as an on-ball playmaker? Even if the answers to those questions are no, Wallace’s floor is high given his top-notch defense.

Aaron Wiggins has emerged as a go-to scorer on second units, and Isaiah Joe is one of the league’s best knockdown 3-point shooters. Both will be critical regular-season players — innings-eaters, if you will — whose roles will likely be reduced come playoff time.

Two guards to watch: Ajay Mitchell and Nikola Topić. Mitchell was born and raised in Belgium before moving to the U.S. to play college ball at UC Santa Barbara. The Thunder drafted him with the 38th pick in the 2024 draft. The Thunder selected Topić with the 12th pick in that same draft. The Serbian guard was seen as a steal in that range, having only fallen because of the ACL injury he suffered just before the draft. Both need plenty of on-ball reps, but where will Daigneault find time for them? Mitchell is likely the more ready player now, but the 20-year-old Topić has a higher ceiling.

FINAL ANALYSIS

The Thunder probably won’t win 68 games again. It’s normal to expect some sort of regression effort-wise, particularly on the defensive end. The Thunder were one of the best defensive teams of all time a season ago. Expect this team to pace itself ahead of what figures to be another deep postseason run. That being said, the Thunder’s combination of talent and depth is unmatched.

We’ve yet to see this version of the Thunder at its best. The primes of Gilgeous-Alexander, Williams and Holmgren won’t overlap for another season or two. That’s a scary thought for the rest of the league — for this season and years beyond.

2025-26 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 21	Houston	7:30
Oct. 23	at Indiana	7:30
Oct. 25	at Atlanta	7:30
Oct. 27	at Dallas	8:30
Oct. 28	Sacramento	8:00
Oct. 30	Washington	8:00

NOVEMBER

Nov. 2	New Orleans	3:30
Nov. 4	at L.A. Clippers	11:00
Nov. 5	at Portland	10:00
Nov. 7	at Sacramento*	10:00
Nov. 9	at Memphis	6:00
Nov. 11	Golden State	8:00
Nov. 12	L.A. Lakers	9:30
Nov. 15	at Charlotte	7:00
Nov. 17	at New Orleans	8:00
Nov. 19	Sacramento	8:00
Nov. 21	at Utah	10:00
Nov. 23	Portland	7:00
Nov. 26	Minnesota*	7:30
Nov. 28	Phoenix*	9:30
Nov. 30	at Portland	6:00

DECEMBER

Dec. 2	at Golden State	11:00
Dec. 5	Dallas	9:30
Dec. 7	at Utah	8:00
Dec. 9, 10	Emirates NBA Cup Quarterfinals	
Dec. 13	Emirates NBA Cup Semifinals	
Dec. 16	Emirates NBA Cup Championship	
Dec. 17	L.A. Clippers	8:00

Dec. 19	at Minnesota	9:30
Dec. 22	Memphis	9:30
Dec. 23	at San Antonio	8:30
Dec. 25	San Antonio	2:30
Dec. 28	Philadelphia	3:30
Dec. 29	Atlanta	8:00
Dec. 31	Portland	8:00

JANUARY

Jan. 2	at Golden State	10:00
Jan. 4	at Phoenix	8:00
Jan. 5	Charlotte	8:00
Jan. 7	Utah	8:00
Jan. 9	at Memphis	8:00
Jan. 11	Miami	7:00
Jan. 13	San Antonio	8:00
Jan. 15	at Houston	7:30
Jan. 17	at Miami	8:00
Jan. 19	at Cleveland	2:30
Jan. 21	at Milwaukee	9:30
Jan. 23	Indiana	9:30
Jan. 25	Toronto	7:00
Jan. 27	New Orleans	8:00
Jan. 29	at Minnesota	9:30

FEBRUARY

Feb. 1	at Denver	9:30
Feb. 3	Orlando	8:00
Feb. 4	at San Antonio	9:30
Feb. 7	Houston	3:30
Feb. 9	at L.A. Lakers	10:00
Feb. 11	at Phoenix	9:00
Feb. 12	Milwaukee	7:30

Feb. 20	Brooklyn	8:00
Feb. 22	Cleveland	1:00
Feb. 24	at Toronto	7:30
Feb. 25	at Detroit	7:00
Feb. 27	Denver	9:30

MARCH

March 1	at Dallas	8:00
March 3	at Chicago	8:00
March 4	at New York	7:00
March 7	Golden State	8:30
March 9	Denver	7:30
March 12	Boston	9:30
March 15	Minnesota	1:00
March 17	at Orlando	7:00
March 18	at Brooklyn	7:30
March 21	at Washington	5:00
March 23	at Philadelphia	7:00
March 25	at Boston	7:30
March 27	Chicago	8:00
March 29	New York	7:30
March 30	Detroit	9:30

APRIL

April 2	L.A. Lakers	7:30
April 5	Utah	7:00
April 7	at L.A. Lakers	10:30
April 8	at L.A. Clippers	10:00
April 10	at Denver	10:00
April 12	Phoenix	8:30

*Emirates NBA Cup regular-season game
All times Eastern



PORTLAND TRAIL BLAZERS

NORTHWEST DIVISION PREDICTION: **4TH**

The Portland Trail Blazers want to take off the training wheels and transition to the next phase of their rebuild. That means that for the first time since 2022, the Blazers will enter fall camp aiming for the playoffs, or at minimum, the Play-In Tournament. After a strong second-half finish last season improved Portland's year-over-year win total by 15, the organization feels that it's ready.

Franchise legend Damian Lillard is back for a storybook reunion, but his return won't pay dividends until next season as he recovers from a torn Achilles. Instead, the Blazers are counting on the continued emergence of Deni Avdija and Toumani Camara, internal development from key young players and a heavy lean into their defensive identity to carry them upward. They also brought in veteran fixer-upper Jrue Holiday to help with the job.

Still, in a deep Western Conference, improvement in the standings is no guarantee, even if the Blazers improve on the court.

FRONT COURT

The Blazers reached a buyout with Deandre Ayton in June, clearing the starting center spot for 21-year-old Donovan Clingan. The 7-foot-2 Clingan should immediately assert himself as one of the league's premier rim protectors and the drop-coverage anchor of Portland's defense. As a rookie, Clingan blocked shots at an elite rate, and he regularly deterred players from attempting shots because of his positioning. Clingan's offensive game is limited, but he'll rebound and score his way to double-doubles thanks to dunks and putbacks.

Backing up Clingan, rookie center Yang Hansen shows tantalizing promise as a 7-foot-1 playmaking hub who can do a bit of everything on offense. The No. 16 overall pick from China will take his lumps as he adjusts to NBA speed and strength. But he'll get the minutes to work through those growing pains right away. If he can stay healthy, Robert Williams III will help carry some of the reserve center minutes. He's another effective defender and lob threat.

The biggest revelation of Portland's 2024-25 season came at the forward spots. After a slow start to his Portland tenure, Avdija became the franchise's best player by spring. From January on, the 6-foot-9 forward averaged 19.8 points, 8.4 rebounds and 4.5 assists per game, and those numbers only got better the further the season progressed. Avdija can shoot the 3-pointer well, but his gift is attacking the rim with blazing speed and bruising physicality. If he can build on his post-December stats while improving as a playmaker, he may flirt with All-Star numbers or a run at Most Improved Player.

SCOUTING THE BLAZERS

ANONYMOUS TAKES
FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

"You really have to like what you saw from them at the end of last season. ... It was good to see because Chauncey Billups was on the hot seat, undeservedly so. He's really gotten this group to perform. ... Landing Jrue Holiday will be huge. He's won two titles and really gets after it. He'll be the poster child for the way Billups wants this team to play. ... This has to be the season Scoot Henderson takes another step forward. They drafted him with the idea that he could replace Damian Lillard. He's not come close to that. ... The Lillard signing was a feel-good story, but trust me, that's all it was. The Bucks couldn't wait to get rid of him."



SHAEDON
SHARPE

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Record: 42-30	Record: 27-55	Record: 33-49	Record: 21-61	Record: 36-46
Division: 3rd	Division: 4th	Division: 5th	Division: 5th	Division: 4th

FROM LEFT: SOOBUM IM-IMAGN IMAGES; BOB DECHIARA-IMAGN IMAGES



BEYOND THE ARC

THE ESSENTIALS It turns out rookie Yang Hansen is like most 20-year-olds. At his Portland introductory press conference, he was asked about his hobbies outside of basketball. With a big grin, Hansen gave this answer: "I sleep all the time. I like to play [PlayStation 5], and I like to eat."

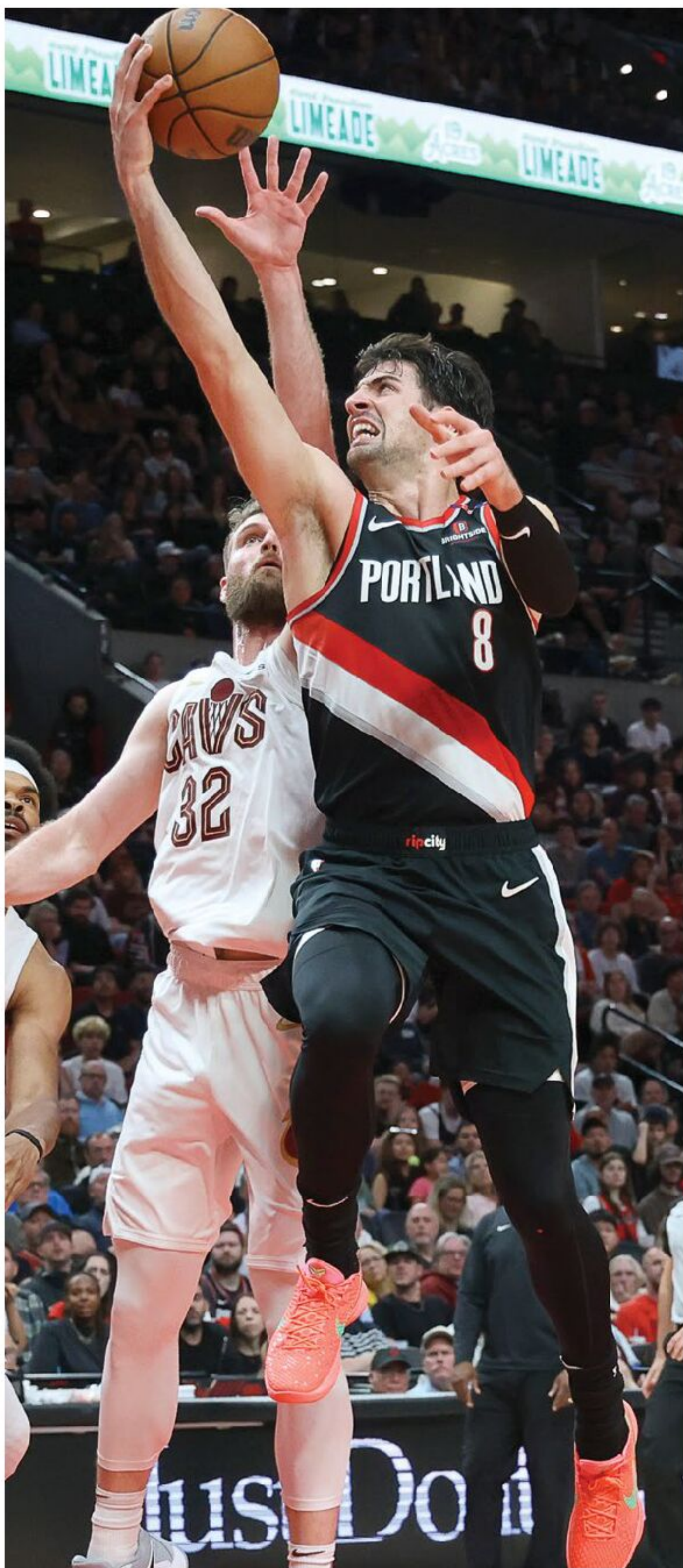
WIFI TROUBLES During his two seasons with the Milwaukee Bucks, Damian Lillard rented the house of friend and new Blazers teammate Jrue Holiday, whom Milwaukee traded in 2023 to bring in Lillard. Looking back on his stay, Lillard revealed that everything wasn't perfect. "I was complaining to him about the WiFi," he said. "There's a clip online where I shake his hand. We played them in Boston, and we had an interaction. We were literally talking about his WiFi."

IN HOLIDAY'S DEFENSE... When Holiday walked away from reporters after his introductory presser with Portland media, he turned back to offer a brief rebuttal to Lillard's complaints: "And my WiFi wasn't that bad."

TEAM WORLD The Blazers feature one of the most internationally diverse rosters in the NBA, with seven players hailing from outside the U.S.: Toumani Camara (Belgium), Shae-don Sharpe (Canada), Deni Avdija (Israel), Yang Hansen (China), Duop Reath (South Sudan/Australia), Rayan Rupert (France) and Sidy Cissoko (France). That number jumps to eight when including Matisse Thybulle, who holds dual citizenship in the U.S. and Australia.



JRUE HOLIDAY



DENI AVDIJA

Anfernee Simons and two second-round picks for Holiday. At 35, Holiday is looking to bounce back from a down season. Even if he doesn't return to peak form, the two-time champion will be a welcome offensive piece and a massive defensive upgrade. It remains unclear who will start between him and Portland's young guards. That situation may evolve throughout the season. Regardless, Holiday complements the backcourt better than the outgoing Simons, who worked best in a ball-dominant role that clashed with Henderson's style. In contrast, Holiday can handle point guard duties alongside Sharpe or slot in as a 3-and-D wing alongside Henderson.

FINAL ANALYSIS

The departure of Ayton and the Simons-for-Holiday swap help Portland's roster make more sense. The pieces fit together more cohesively, and the roles appear well-defined. That'll bode well for development and chemistry. Along with better roster cohesion, the Blazers already completed the difficult challenge of establishing a defensive identity. Now, they can build on that foundation. Billups has a stable of switchable, disruptive defenders to mix and match, backed by Clingan's rim protection. The issues emerge on the offensive end. The Blazers were a bottom-five 3-point shooting team last season, and that was before Simons left. Plus, unless Avdija, Sharpe or Henderson takes a massive leap, the franchise lacks a bona fide No. 1 star. Those issues make achieving genuine postseason success a vexing riddle. However, those issues won't stop the Blazers from taking incremental steps this season. They'll be a competitive, scrappy team that takes care of business against lower competition and plays tough against high-level opponents. That could get the Blazers to around 41 wins and the Play-In Tournament but nothing more than that.

2025-26 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 22	Minnesota	10:00
Oct. 24	Golden State	10:00
Oct. 26	at L.A. Clippers	9:00
Oct. 27	at L.A. Lakers	10:30
Oct. 29	at Utah	9:00
Oct. 31	Denver*	10:00

NOVEMBER

Nov. 3	L.A. Lakers	10:00
Nov. 5	Oklahoma City	10:00
Nov. 8	at Miami	8:00
Nov. 10	at Orlando	7:00
Nov. 12	at New Orleans	8:00
Nov. 14	at Houston*	8:00
Nov. 16	at Dallas	7:30
Nov. 18	Phoenix	11:00
Nov. 19	Chicago	10:00
Nov. 21	at Golden State*	10:00
Nov. 23	at Oklahoma City	7:00
Nov. 24	at Milwaukee	8:00
Nov. 26	San Antonio*	10:00
Nov. 30	Oklahoma City	6:00

DECEMBER

Dec. 2	at Toronto	7:30
Dec. 3	at Cleveland	7:00
Dec. 5	at Detroit	7:30
Dec. 7	at Memphis	6:00
Dec. 9, 10	Emirates NBA Cup Quarterfinals	
Dec. 13	Emirates NBA Cup Semifinals	
Dec. 16	Emirates NBA Cup Championship	
Dec. 18	Sacramento	10:00

Dec. 20	at Sacramento	10:00
Dec. 22	Detroit	10:00
Dec. 23	Orlando	10:00
Dec. 26	L.A. Clippers	10:00
Dec. 28	Boston	6:00
Dec. 29	Dallas	11:00
Dec. 31	at Oklahoma City	8:00

JANUARY

Jan. 2	at New Orleans	8:00
Jan. 3	at San Antonio	8:00
Jan. 5	Utah	10:00
Jan. 7	Houston	10:00
Jan. 9	Houston	10:00
Jan. 11	New York	6:00
Jan. 13	at Golden State	11:00
Jan. 15	Atlanta	10:00
Jan. 17	L.A. Lakers	10:00
Jan. 18	at Sacramento	9:00
Jan. 22	Miami	10:00
Jan. 23	Toronto	10:00
Jan. 26	at Boston	8:00
Jan. 27	at Washington	7:00
Jan. 30	at New York	7:30

FEBRUARY

Feb. 1	Cleveland	9:00
Feb. 3	Phoenix	11:00
Feb. 6	Memphis	10:00
Feb. 7	Memphis	10:00
Feb. 9	Philadelphia	10:00
Feb. 11	at Minnesota	8:00
Feb. 12	at Utah	9:00

Feb. 20	Denver	10:00
Feb. 22	at Phoenix	8:00
Feb. 24	Minnesota	11:00
Feb. 26	at Chicago	8:00
Feb. 28	at Charlotte	1:00

MARCH

March 1	at Atlanta	6:00
March 4	at Memphis	8:00
March 6	at Houston	8:00
March 8	Indiana	9:00
March 10	Charlotte	10:00
March 13	Utah	10:00
March 15	at Philadelphia	6:00
March 16	at Brooklyn	7:30
March 18	at Indiana	7:30
March 20	at Minnesota	8:00
March 22	at Denver	5:00
March 23	Brooklyn	10:00
March 25	Milwaukee	10:00
March 27	Dallas	10:00
March 29	Washington	6:00
March 31	at L.A. Clippers	11:00

APRIL

April 2	New Orleans	10:00
April 6	at Denver	9:00
April 8	at San Antonio	8:00
April 10	L.A. Clippers	10:00
April 12	Sacramento	8:30

*Emirates NBA Cup regular-season game
All times Eastern



UTAH JAZZ

NORTHWEST DIVISION PREDICTION: 5TH

The Utah Jazz whiffed on the 2024-25 season. They also struck out in the Cooper Flagg sweepstakes.

The Jazz vow to get up, dust themselves off and try once again.

Given Utah's current circumstances, that does not mean they want or expect to become significantly more competitive than they were in 2024-25, when they finished last in the Western Conference (17-65).

Their company line aside, the Jazz want to lose as many games as possible to get a top pick in the 2026 NBA Draft. The Jazz also have less margin for error since they owe their first-round pick to the Oklahoma City Thunder unless the pick falls within the top eight.

As the Jazz can attest, losing the most games does not guarantee that the ping pong balls will bounce their way. The Dallas Mavericks landed the No. 1 pick for Flagg despite having only a 1.8% chance. The Jazz had a 14% chance. With its last-place finish, however, Utah at least ensured it would not fare any worse than the No. 5 overall pick, using that selection on Ace Bailey.

Where do the Jazz go from here? Aside from the inevitable losing ahead, they will deal with some familiar themes.

The franchise will try to further develop its crop of young players. The Jazz will either try to clear cap space, collect draft picks or make a major deal before the Feb. 5 trade deadline. They will lean on good coaching (Will Hardy) and a few veterans to promote strong work habits that will become helpful once the team is competitive again.

FRONT COURT

After the Jazz acquired Lauri Markkanen from the Cleveland Cavaliers as part of the Donovan Mitchell trade (2022), Markkanen collected both accolades (first-time All-Star in 2023) and earnings (five-year, \$238 million extension in 2024). In his third season with Utah, Markkanen took a dip with his scoring (19 points per game, his lowest average in three years), shooting percentage (career-low 42.3%) and rebounding (5.9, lowest in three years). Markkanen also played in a career-low 47 games because of issues with his back and left knee.

Markkanen expects to be fully healthy for the 2025-26 season. The Jazz need Markkanen to be at his best since he's the primary veteran holdover from last season. They also need Markkanen to mentor the team's younger players while displaying optimal trade value in case the team receives an enticing offer that includes him as the centerpiece before the deadline.

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Record: 52-20	Record: 49-33	Record: 37-45	Record: 31-51	Record: 17-65
Division: 1st	Division: 1st	Division: 4th	Division: 4th	Division: 5th

SCOUTING THE JAZZ

ANONYMOUS TAKES FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

"I'm not really sure what the plan is here other than to just keep being bad. ...

I do like the frontcourt of Lauri Markkanen, Ace Bailey and Walker Kessler. I'm less enthused about the backcourt. But it deserves time.

... With Kyle Filipowski, they are set with bigs for years to come. ... Keyonte George has all the tools to develop into a special player. But he's gonna take some lumps still. ...

Georges Niang will bring fire to an otherwise lost cause of a season. I still think they could use another winning older player to lead and help keep spirits high. ... It's going to be another long season, and I don't know where they plan on going from here."



WALKER KESSLER

FROM LEFT: CHRIS NICOLL-IMAGN IMAGES; JOE CAMPOREALE-IMAGN IMAGES



BEYOND THE ARC

NO EXIT STRATEGY

Since he declined a pre-draft workout with Utah, did rookie forward Ace Bailey ever consider not reporting to the Jazz? “No, not at all,” Bailey says. “I’m just blessed to be in this position.”

STAYING COMMITTED

A year after signing a five-year, \$238 million extension, Jazz forward Lauri Markkanen maintains patience with the team’s rebuilding. “Signing here kind of tells you the confidence in the organization and the guys that we have,” Markkanen says. “I love being in Utah.” The Jazz couldn’t trade Markkanen last year per his contract, but he could become a candidate leading into the Feb. 5 deadline. “I’m ready for it,” Markkanen says. “It’s a part of the business. It can happen overnight like it did last time. You learn not to worry about ‘what if.’”

BIG GOALS The Jazz signed head coach Will Hardy to an extension through 2031 after an 85-161 record through three seasons. Milwaukee Bucks head coach Doc Rivers argues that a coach’s record with a rebuilding team shouldn’t count. “I’m sure Doc was fine with the wins and the championship in Boston,” Hardy says. “I don’t think it’s fair for us to say, ‘Oh, this shouldn’t be on me.’ This is the job. This is the responsibility. This is what you sign up for — the good, the bad, the in-between.”



LAURI MARKKANEN

Bailey will be the most important player for Markkanen to mentor. The Jazz project Bailey as a player ready to contribute right away because of his strong finishing, shooting and perimeter defense. But he will need someone of Markkanen's stature to help him improve his shot selection, encourage him through any hiccups and push him to maintain the strong work ethic that impressed scouts.

Fourth-year center Walker Kessler finished with career highs last season in points (11.1) and rebounds (12.2) per game while becoming a strong rim protector. He looked more comfortable with his decision-making and familiarity with the team's rotations. Because of Kessler's ongoing growth, the Jazz are expected to sign him to an extension. He has one year left on his four-year, \$13.4 million rookie contract, but if the Jazz further commit to Kessler now, they can secure him at a more reasonable price and still maintain the flexibility to trade him in future seasons should he continue to blossom.

The Jazz traded forward John Collins to the Los Angeles Clippers, while the Miami Heat sent Kevin Love and Kyle Anderson to Utah. The Jazz also acquired veteran center Jusuf Nurkić from the Charlotte Hornets for point guard Collin Sexton and a future second-round pick.

Love, Anderson and Nurkić are all skilled offensively but lack speed. Don't expect any of them to stay with Utah too long. Instead, second-year center Kyle Filipowski, third-year forward Taylor Hendricks and nine-year veteran Georges Niang (acquired via trade with the Boston Celtics) will log most of the reserve minutes.

BACKCOURT

The Jazz depleted their backcourt by trading a dynamic playmaker (Sexton) and a high-volume scorer (Jordan Clarkson), but they did so on purpose. The Jazz will likely lose more games, but they also opened up spots for younger players.

Second-year guard Isaiah Collier will receive the bulk of the minutes at the point guard position after assuming the starting spot midway through his rookie season. Collier excelled enough as a playmaker to break John Stockton's rookie assist record (Collier had 446, Stockton had 415). Collier also impressed the Jazz with his improved condition-

9

That's the number of players on the Jazz's current roster who were selected within the past four NBA drafts (2022-25). The Jazz would love to add multiple players next year from the 2026 draft class. That is a more likely outcome for the franchise than orchestrating a big trade.



Ace Bailey

OFFSEASON MOVES

DRAFT PICKS

1 ACE BAILEY

F, 6-7, 200, Rutgers

1 WALTER CLAYTON JR.

G, 6-2, 195, Florida

2 JOHN TONJE

G, 6-5, 218, Wisconsin

At least in his rookie season, Bailey will enjoy playing with the Jazz because of his large role. The Jazz trust Bailey to excel as a scorer, passer, rebounder and defender. Clayton and Tonje will likely receive consistent bench minutes for their scoring and defense. The Jazz will allow all three players to play through mistakes and learn without the pressure to win. Most rookies don't have that luxury.

OTHER NEWCOMERS

It would be surprising if new arrivals Kevin Love, Kyle Anderson or Jusuf Nurkić played meaningful minutes. All are accomplished and smart veterans, but the Jazz want to develop their young players.

ROSTER							2024-25 STATISTICS										48-MINUTE PRODUCTIVITY		
HEAD COACH: WILL HARDY (4TH SEASON; CAREER: 85-161)																			
#	PLAYER	POS	HT	WT	DOB	FROM	YRS	G	MPG	FG%	3P%	FT%	RPG	APG	PPG		REB	AST	PTS
23	Lauri Markkanen	F/C	7-0	240	5/22/97	Arizona	8	47	31.4	.423	.346	.876	5.9	1.5	19.0		9.0	2.3	29.0
3	Keyonte George	G	6-4	185	11/08/03	Baylor	2	67	31.5	.391	.343	.818	3.8	5.6	16.8		5.8	8.6	25.6
24	Walker Kessler	C	7-0	245	7/26/01	Auburn	3	58	30.0	.663	.176	.520	12.2	1.7	11.1		19.5	2.7	17.7
28	Brice Sensabaugh	F	6-5	235	10/30/03	Ohio State	2	71	20.2	.459	.422	.890	3.0	1.5	10.9		7.0	3.7	25.9
20	Georges Niang	F	6-7	230	6/17/93	Iowa State	9	79	21.5	.461	.406	.793	3.4	1.4	9.9		7.7	3.1	22.2
22	Kyle Filipowski	C	6-11	250	11/07/03	Duke	1	72	21.1	.502	.350	.650	6.1	1.9	9.6		13.9	4.4	21.8
30	Jusuf Nurkić	C	7-0	290	8/23/94	Cedevita	11	51	20.8	.477	.305	.664	7.8	2.3	8.9		18.0	5.2	20.5
10	Svi Mykhailiuk	G/F	6-7	205	6/10/97	Kansas	7	38	20.0	.391	.345	.800	2.4	2.0	8.8		5.7	4.8	21.1
8	Isaiah Collier	G	6-3	210	10/08/04	USC	1	71	25.9	.422	.249	.682	3.3	6.3	8.7		6.1	11.6	16.1
99	KJ Martin	F	6-6	215	1/06/01	IMG Academy (FL)	5	43	21.2	.552	.259	.787	2.9	1.1	6.4		6.6	2.5	14.4
2	Kyle Anderson	F/G	6-9	230	9/20/93	UCLA	11	61	16.4	.469	.357	.738	3.4	2.4	5.9		9.9	6.9	17.1
42	Kevin Love	F/C	6-8	251	9/07/88	UCLA	17	23	10.9	.357	.358	.696	4.1	1.0	5.3		17.9	4.2	23.3
0	Taylor Hendricks	F	6-9	215	11/22/03	UCF	2	3	24.8	.222	.250	.750	5.0	0.7	4.7		9.7	1.3	9.0
5	Cody Williams	F	6-7	190	11/20/04	Colorado	1	50	21.2	.323	.259	.725	2.3	1.2	4.6		5.1	2.7	10.4
16	Elijah Harkless	G	6-3	195	2/03/00	UNLV	1	10	13.8	.314	.280	.500	2.1	0.8	3.2		7.3	2.8	11.1
34	Oscar Tshiebwe	F/C	6-8	255	11/27/99	Kentucky	2	Did Not Play NBA											
19	Ace Bailey	F	6-7	200	8/13/06	Rutgers		R — First NBA Season											
13	Walter Clayton Jr.	G	6-2	195	3/06/03	Florida		R — First NBA Season											
17	John Tonje	G	6-5	218	4/23/01	Wisconsin		R — First NBA Season											



ISAIAH COLLIER

ing, his aggressive finishing and his consistent film study. But the Jazz hope that Collier can improve his shooting mechanics and defend better without fouling.

Collier’s growth came at the cost of Keyonte George losing his starting position. That doesn’t mean George is expendable entering his third season, but he has plenty of work to do. Hardy has called on George to improve his shot selection (he shot 39.1% overall), his defensive mentality and his conditioning. George also showed frustration at times last season with his demotion. He did improve at playing off the ball, but it’s not clear if he can excel in that role permanently.

George will receive consistent playing time because of the Sexton and Clarkson departures. But rookie guards Walter Clayton Jr. and John Tonje may receive some backup minutes should their college success as shooters and defenders translate quickly. Clayton hopes to earn the “Walt Lake City” nickname that’s already been bestowed upon him.

FINAL ANALYSIS

The late NBA legend Jerry West once dismissed the NBA lottery as a “celebration of losers.” Nevertheless, the Jazz should take advantage of the system and tank to improve their lottery odds. Despite typically boasting strong front offices, the Jazz historically have struggled to upgrade their roster through free agency and trades because many NBA players simply don’t want to live in Utah.

At the same time, the Jazz need to show enough progress with their player development and asset collection to ensure that another lottery pick will put them back in the playoffs.

2025-26 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 22	L.A. Clippers	9:00
Oct. 24	at Sacramento	10:00
Oct. 27	Phoenix	9:00
Oct. 29	Portland	9:00
Oct. 31	at Phoenix*	10:00

NOVEMBER

Nov. 2	at Charlotte	6:00
Nov. 3	at Boston	7:30
Nov. 5	at Detroit	7:00
Nov. 7	at Minnesota*	8:00
Nov. 10	Minnesota	9:00
Nov. 11	Indiana	9:00
Nov. 13	Atlanta	9:00
Nov. 16	Chicago	8:00
Nov. 18	at L.A. Lakers	10:30
Nov. 21	Oklahoma City*	10:00
Nov. 23	L.A. Lakers	8:00
Nov. 24	at Golden State	10:00
Nov. 28	Sacramento*	9:30
Nov. 30	Houston	3:00

DECEMBER

Dec. 1	Houston	9:00
Dec. 4	at Brooklyn	7:30
Dec. 5	at New York	7:30
Dec. 7	Oklahoma City	8:00
Dec. 9, 10	Emirates NBA Cup Quarterfinals	
Dec. 13	Emirates NBA Cup Semifinals	
Dec. 16	Emirates NBA Cup Championship	
Dec. 18	L.A. Lakers	9:00
Dec. 20	Orlando	9:30

Dec. 22	at Denver	9:00
Dec. 23	Memphis	9:00
Dec. 26	Detroit	9:30
Dec. 27	at San Antonio	8:00
Dec. 30	Boston	9:00

JANUARY

Jan. 1	at L.A. Clippers	10:30
Jan. 3	at Golden State	10:00
Jan. 5	at Portland	10:00
Jan. 7	at Oklahoma City	8:00
Jan. 8	Dallas	9:00
Jan. 10	Charlotte	9:30
Jan. 12	at Cleveland	7:00
Jan. 14	at Chicago	8:00
Jan. 15	at Dallas	8:30
Jan. 17	at Dallas	5:00
Jan. 19	at San Antonio	8:00
Jan. 20	Minnesota	9:00
Jan. 22	San Antonio	9:00
Jan. 24	Miami	9:30
Jan. 27	L.A. Clippers	10:00
Jan. 28	Golden State	9:00
Jan. 30	Brooklyn	9:30

FEBRUARY

Feb. 1	at Toronto	6:00
Feb. 3	at Indiana	7:00
Feb. 5	at Atlanta	7:30
Feb. 7	at Orlando	7:00
Feb. 9	at Miami	7:30
Feb. 11	Sacramento	9:00
Feb. 12	Portland	9:00

Feb. 20	at Memphis	7:00
Feb. 23	at Houston	9:30
Feb. 26	New Orleans	9:00
Feb. 28	New Orleans	9:30

MARCH

March 2	Denver	9:00
March 4	at Philadelphia	7:30
March 5	at Washington	7:00
March 7	at Milwaukee	8:00
March 9	Golden State	9:00
March 11	New York	9:00
March 13	at Portland	10:00
March 15	at Sacramento	10:00
March 18	at Minnesota	8:00
March 19	Milwaukee	9:00
March 21	Philadelphia	9:30
March 23	Toronto	9:00
March 25	Washington	9:00
March 27	at Denver	9:00
March 28	at Phoenix	10:00
March 30	Cleveland	9:00

APRIL

April 1	Denver	9:00
April 3	at Houston	8:00
April 5	at Oklahoma City	7:00
April 7	at New Orleans	8:00
April 10	Memphis	9:30
April 12	at L.A. Lakers	8:30

**Emirates NBA Cup regular-season game
All times Eastern*



WARRIORS

PACIFIC DIVISION PREDICTION: **3RD**

In 2016, owner Joe Lacob boasted that his Golden State Warriors were better than the other 29 teams and would remain so for many years. “We’ve crushed them on the basketball court, and we’re going to for years because of the way we’ve built this team,” he told *New York Times Magazine*. “We’re light years ahead of probably every other team in structure, in planning, in how we’re going to go about things. We’re going to be a handful for the rest of the NBA to deal with for a long time.”

Lacob was right. There are titles to prove it. However, it is now 2025. The league has caught up, and roster mismanagement is now taking its toll.

Since winning the title in 2022, Golden State has struggled to make the playoffs. Last season, it took a 20-7 record after the All-Star break and a Play-In Tournament win against the Memphis Grizzlies just to get in as the seventh seed. The Western Conference is even more of a gauntlet with younger, more athletic teams, while the Warriors are still relying on small-ball lineups and a predictable motion offense. The only change for Golden State is that the core is another year older.

It’s up to Stephen Curry, Draymond Green and Jimmy Butler to carry (or drag) this imperfect roster back to real contention.

FRONTCOURT

Green, now in his 14th season, is still the pillar of the frontcourt. In this offense, he is a playmaker and a connector rather than a scorer. The results may be a bit inconsistent, but his effort level remains high, and the Warriors are better offensively when he’s taking advantage of defenses sagging off of him. Green’s field-goal percentage (42.4) last season was respectable, and he increased his scoring to 9.0 points per game. However, it doesn’t negate the fact that he still shrinks the floor with his limited shooting.

Defensively, Green remains valuable. He earned a spot on the All-Defensive first team and still disrupts offenses. His health and durability in small-lineup roles are concerns.

With the loss of Kevon Looney to the New Orleans Pelicans and the absence of a reliable center, Green will more than likely play heavy minutes at the 5. The Warriors need to find a center who can relieve pressure on Green and provide effective scoring.

Since arriving in the Bay in February, Butler has been the quint-essential Warrior. His integration into the system carried the team through the second half of the season and into the playoffs. Like Green, he is a facilitator and a connector. He can push the pace in transition, and his dribble hand-offs in the half court are a seamless

SCOUTING THE WARRIORS

ANONYMOUS TAKES FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

“The league and media love these guys like maybe no team before them. ... Steph Curry is perhaps the most dangerous 37-year-old ever. I’m still amazed that no one can figure out how to defend him. But no one can, and I doubt that changes. ... Draymond Green is always a great defender, and I think his offense was even better last season than the previous few years. For all his flaws, he’s a winner. ... Jimmy Butler will still get it done from time to time, but I don’t know that this is an ideal setting for him. They don’t really run an offense tailored to his talents. ... I think they’ll need to make another big move if they’re going to get anywhere.”



JIMMY BUTLER

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Record: 39-33	Record: 53-29	Record: 44-38	Record: 46-36	Record: 48-34
Division: 4th	Division: 2nd	Division: 4th	Division: 5th	Division: 3rd



STEPHEN CURRY

BEYOND THE ARC

TOP 10 STEPH? Stephen Curry is currently 24th on the NBA all-time scoring list. At 25,386 points, he's 2,903 points away from the No. 10 spot. If Curry can average 20 or more points and remain healthy, he can grab the No. 15 spot this season and crack the top 10 in season 18.

PARTING SHOT Kevon Looney signed a two-year deal with the New Orleans Pelicans. In an exclusive interview with Marcus Thompson II of *The Athletic* on the Warriors Plus/Minus podcast, Looney shared how he felt slighted by some of head coach Steve Kerr's rotation decisions. "It's like, 'All right, y'all don't trust me? I thought y'all trusted me? They put me at the end in Game 7, it's like, why'd we have to get to this point?'" Looney played only 9.3 minutes per game to Quinten Post's 17 in the playoff series against the Houston Rockets.

CHECKMATE Post didn't play in the Summer League, but he did walk out of Las Vegas a winner. Post participated in the Chess-tival Blitz pro-am chess tournament, defeating the San Antonio Spurs' Harrison Ingram in the finals.

STOTTS RETURNS It was speculated that Warriors assistant Terry Stotts was going to join Mike Brown's coaching staff with the New York Knicks. SNY's Ian Begley reported that the Warriors' lead assistant "doesn't plan on going anywhere" and will be back with the team this season.



DRAYMOND GREEN

Buddy Hield cannot fill the void left by Klay Thompson, but he has moments where he can provide spacing and auxiliary scoring. However, it's not enough to command a lot of minutes. On an ideal roster, Hield would be a good energy guy off the bench.

Brandin Podziemski is a gamer whose hustle has propelled him to the starting lineup and into Kerr's good graces. He's a solid ball-handler and game manager who has no reservations about doing the dirty work. But for all of his hustle, Podziemski is a clunky fit at the 2 due to his inconsistent shooting. Podziemski would be more effective running the point for the second unit, where he can facilitate and manage the game while Curry sits.

Moses Moody is another underutilized player who's racked up more DNP's than Kuminga in the four years since the Warriors drafted him 14th overall. Despite having the tools to be a solid wing, Moody sometimes lacks aggression and second-guesses himself on offense.

Gary Payton II is an unrestricted free agent, but there is no market for the 6-foot-2 guard. When he's healthy, Payton offers high-energy minutes and auxiliary defense. He is also a player who is a solid finisher, and he can put pressure on the rim. After another injury-plagued season, look for a healthy Payton to return to his disruptive form.

FINAL ANALYSIS

Dynasties rarely end illustriously. The team still needs an infusion of youth to complement its aging core but is handicapped from making such moves due to roster mismanagement. The addition of Butler bolstered the team en route to the playoffs. The argument for conference dark horse is there, and it's fair. However, the roster as currently constructed is not enough to effectively navigate a tough Western Conference.

2025-26 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 21	at L.A. Lakers	10:00
Oct. 23	Denver	10:00
Oct. 24	at Portland	10:00
Oct. 27	Memphis	10:00
Oct. 28	L.A. Clippers	11:00
Oct. 30	at Milwaukee	8:00

NOVEMBER

Nov. 1	at Indiana	7:00
Nov. 4	Phoenix	10:00
Nov. 5	at Sacramento	10:00
Nov. 7	at Denver*	10:00
Nov. 9	Indiana	8:30
Nov. 11	at Oklahoma City	8:00
Nov. 12	at San Antonio	8:00
Nov. 14	at San Antonio*	9:30
Nov. 16	at New Orleans	7:00
Nov. 18	at Orlando	7:00
Nov. 19	at Miami	7:00
Nov. 21	Portland*	10:00
Nov. 24	Utah	10:00
Nov. 26	Houston*	10:00
Nov. 29	New Orleans	8:30

DECEMBER

Dec. 2	Oklahoma City	11:00
Dec. 4	at Philadelphia	7:00
Dec. 6	at Cleveland	7:30
Dec. 7	at Chicago	7:00
Dec. 9, 10	Emirates NBA Cup Quarterfinals	
Dec. 13	Emirates NBA Cup Semifinals	
Dec. 16	Emirates NBA Cup Championship	

Dec. 18	at Phoenix	9:00
Dec. 20	Phoenix	8:30
Dec. 22	Orlando	10:00
Dec. 25	Dallas	5:00
Dec. 28	at Toronto	3:30
Dec. 29	at Brooklyn	7:30
Dec. 31	at Charlotte	1:00

JANUARY

Jan. 2	Oklahoma City	10:00
Jan. 3	Utah	10:00
Jan. 5	at L.A. Clippers	10:00
Jan. 7	Milwaukee	10:00
Jan. 9	Sacramento	10:00
Jan. 11	Atlanta	8:30
Jan. 13	Portland	11:00
Jan. 15	New York	10:00
Jan. 17	Charlotte	8:30
Jan. 19	Miami	10:00
Jan. 20	Toronto	10:00
Jan. 22	at Dallas	7:30
Jan. 24	at Minnesota	5:30
Jan. 26	at Minnesota	9:30
Jan. 28	at Utah	9:00
Jan. 30	Detroit	10:00

FEBRUARY

Feb. 3	Philadelphia	10:00
Feb. 5	at Phoenix	9:00
Feb. 7	at L.A. Lakers	8:30
Feb. 9	Memphis	10:00
Feb. 11	San Antonio	10:00
Feb. 19	Boston	10:00

Feb. 22	Denver	3:30
Feb. 24	at New Orleans	8:00
Feb. 25	at Memphis	7:30
Feb. 28	L.A. Lakers	8:30

MARCH

March 2	L.A. Clippers	10:00
March 5	at Houston	7:30
March 7	at Oklahoma City	8:30
March 9	at Utah	9:00
March 10	Chicago	10:00
March 13	Minnesota	10:00
March 15	at New York	8:00
March 16	at Washington	7:00
March 18	at Boston	7:00
March 20	at Detroit	7:30
March 21	at Atlanta	8:00
March 23	at Dallas	9:30
March 25	Brooklyn	10:00
March 27	Washington	10:00
March 29	at Denver	10:00

APRIL

April 1	San Antonio	10:00
April 2	Cleveland	10:00
April 5	Houston	10:00
April 7	Sacramento	10:00
April 9	L.A. Lakers	10:00
April 10	at Sacramento	10:00
April 12	at L.A. Clippers	8:30

*Emirates NBA Cup regular-season game
All times Eastern



CLIPPERS

PACIFIC DIVISION PREDICTION: **2ND**

The apparent goal for the Los Angeles Clippers after getting bounced out of the first round of the playoffs by the Denver Nuggets last season was to get younger.

Instead, they got older. So old that their average age entering this season will be 33.2 if there are no further roster changes, making them the oldest team in the NBA. So old that this group stands to be the oldest team in NBA history.

Clippers president of basketball operations Lawrence Frank theorizes that just because the team is older doesn't mean it will be any less competitive. If anything, the Clippers gained valuable experience and added quality depth to their roster.

It all starts with the Clippers' two stars — Kawhi Leonard, who is 34, and James Harden, who turned 36 on Aug. 26.

Frank added newcomers Bradley Beal (32), Brook Lopez (37) and Chris Paul (40). The Clippers already had Nicolas Batum (36), Bogdan Bogdanović (33) and Kris Dunn (31) in the mix.

Yes, the Clippers do have some twentysomethings in Ivica Zubac (28) and John Collins (28), who will be starters, and key reserve Derrick Jones Jr. (28). But for the most part, the Clippers are a decidedly veteran team.

"What's age? Frank asks. "It's just a number, right? I think ultimately you're looking to make your team as best as you can possibly make it, whether it's younger or older. I think we're going to lean into experience. We'll just continue to add the best people possible regardless of age."

For Clippers head coach Tyronn Lue, Job 1 will be keeping players happy in light of the team's depth. The Clippers legitimately have 11 rotation-worthy players. It's hard enough to play nine players a game, and it can be a stretch to play 10.

Of course, health is always going to be an issue, and that's where all this depth will pay off.

FRONTCOURT

Leonard's health will be of paramount importance for the Clippers — as always. He missed the first 34 games of last season while dealing with lingering right knee issues and then played in only 37 of the team's final 48 games. Over the course of his six seasons with the Clippers, Leonard has played in only 226 regular-season games out of a possible 472 (47.9%).

But when Leonard was on the court for the Clippers last season, he displayed why he's one of the league's best two-way players. He

SCOUTING THE CLIPPERS

ANONYMOUS TAKES FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

"I like what they did this offseason, adding John Collins, and to a lesser extent, Bradley Beal. ... But I also wonder how far you can get with stars on the back nine of their careers like Kawhi Leonard and James Harden. ... Beal has never done much for me. He's a good guy, but all he really does is shoot. Are you gonna run Beal and Harden out there together? I don't know that that's a great idea. ... Norman Powell will be a big loss. He carried them some nights. ... It's still hard for me to envision them being much more than a pretty good regular-season team. ... The next big change they would make would be Ty Lue as head coach if things go south."



KAWHI LEONARD

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Record: 47-25	Record: 42-40	Record: 44-38	Record: 51-31	Record: 50-32
Division: 2nd	Division: 3rd	Division: 3rd	Division: 1st	Division: 2nd



JAMES HARDEN

BEYOND THE ARC

THE WALL The Wall inside Intuit Dome is a section of seats behind one basket chock-full of Clippers superfans who try to create a difficult environment for the opposing teams. It appears to have worked to a degree last season. When opponents shot free throws facing The Wall, they made them at a 73.4% clip. At the other end, opponents made 76.1% of their attempts.

HELLO, MICKEY MOUSE Fans shouldn't be surprised if one day they are at Disneyland and run into 7-foot-1 giant Brook Lopez. You see, Lopez is known for his love of Disney, and he's now in close proximity to the theme park. "I'm looking forward to it as much as I can while still being responsible, keeping important things in check, right?" Lopez said, laughing.

PICK-AND-ROLL PARTNERS James Harden and Ivica Zubac have developed one of the best partnerships in the NBA when it comes to the pick-and-roll. Last season, Harden assisted Zubac more times than any other player in the NBA assisted any teammate, at 209. Look for that to continue.

EXPANDING HIS GAME There were a few games in which Zubac shot his floater from 15 feet out, but not many. Zubac joked about having the 3-pointer in his bag of tricks. But he didn't shoot any 3s last season and has shot only 12 over his nine-year career, making one. Is this the season when Zubac steps out to the 3-point line?

LOS ANGELES CLIPPERS

played in all seven of the Clippers’ playoff games against the Nuggets, averaging 25 points, 7.6 rebounds and 4.7 assists and shooting 53.7% from the field and 40.5% from 3-point range.

The smart money says the Clippers will be cautious with Leonard this season. The key will be to keep him as healthy as possible and to make sure he’s available for an extended playoff run.

The continued evolution of Zubac has made him a central character in the Clippers’ success, leaving many to view him as a top-five NBA center and the third-best player on the team. Zubac can shoot with either hand and has become a top-notch pick-and-roll partner for Harden.

Zubac’s defense has improved to the point that he was named to the NBA’s All-Defensive second team. If he continues to build on last season, when he posted career highs in points (16.8 ppg), rebounds (12.6 rpg) and games played (80), the Clippers have the potential to be formidable.

Getting Collins from the Utah Jazz in a three-team trade that sent Norman Powell to the Miami Heat gives the Clippers more size and youth. Collins is 6-foot-9 and a great athlete, and he has even developed a 3-point shot, making 39.9% of his attempts last season with the Jazz. When the Clippers go to a small-ball lineup, Collins can play the center position.

Lopez gives the Clippers a center with size (7-foot-1), skills and experience, something they lacked last season. Lopez will be a backup to Zubac, and there could be times when the two are on the court together. The duo could be dangerous because of Lopez’s ability to stretch the floor with his outside shooting.

Jones is a high flyer who will throw down lobbs and is the team’s best defender. Batum is the Clippers’ man for any occasion.

BACKCOURT

This is where things will get interesting for Lue because he has five guards who will all want to play.

Harden will be the starter at point guard. He’s coming off a season in which he made the All-Star team for the 11th time in his career and was third-team All-NBA. He played in 79 games and averaged 35.3 minutes per game to go along with

14

The Clippers have produced 14 consecutive winning seasons, a streak that started with the 2011-12 season. It’s the longest active streak of winning seasons in the NBA. In half of those seasons, the Clippers won at least 50 games.



Bradley Beal

OFFSEASON MOVES

DRAFT PICKS

1 YANIC KONAN NIEDERHÄUSER
C, 6-11, 242, Penn State

2 KOBE SANDERS
F, 6-9, 207, Nevada

At 22 and nearly 7-feet, Niederhäuser provides the Clippers with the youth and size they have been seeking. He’ll learn from starter Ivica Zubac and Brook Lopez. During the NBA Summer League in Las Vegas, Niederhäuser showed that he could be a good rebounder and rim-protector. His offense needs work, but it improved as the summer went along. Sanders, acquired from the New York Knicks in a draft-night deal, is a good athlete who will spend plenty of time playing for the Clippers’ G-League team, the San Diego Clippers.

OTHER NEWCOMERS

Lopez, Bradley Beal and Chris Paul are all 30-plus, but they are still playing at a high enough level to give the team quality depth.

ROSTER																48-MINUTE		
HEAD COACH: TYRONN LUE (6TH SEASON; CAREER: 362-249)																PRODUCTIVITY		
#	PLAYER	POS	HT	WT	DOB	FROM	YRS	G	MPG	FG%	3P%	FT%	RPG	APG	PPG	REB	AST	PTS
1	James Harden	G	6-5	220	8/26/89	Arizona State	16	79	35.3	.410	.352	.874	5.8	8.7	22.8	7.8	11.8	31.0
2	Kawhi Leonard	F	6-7	225	6/29/91	San Diego State	13	37	31.9	.498	.411	.810	5.9	3.1	21.5	8.9	4.7	32.4
20	John Collins	F/C	6-9	226	9/23/97	Wake Forest	8	40	30.5	.527	.399	.848	8.2	2.0	19.0	12.9	3.1	29.8
3	Bradley Beal	G	6-4	207	6/28/93	Florida	13	53	32.1	.497	.386	.803	3.3	3.7	17.0	5.0	5.5	25.4
40	Ivica Zubac	C	7-0	240	3/18/97	Mega Basket	9	80	32.8	.628	—	.661	12.6	2.7	16.8	18.5	3.9	24.5
11	Brook Lopez	C	7-1	282	4/01/88	Stanford	17	80	31.8	.509	.373	.826	5.0	1.8	13.0	7.6	2.7	19.6
10	Bogdan Bogdanović	G	6-5	225	8/18/92	Fenerbahce	8	54	25.0	.427	.363	.879	2.9	2.7	10.8	5.7	5.2	20.8
5	Derrick Jones Jr.	F	6-6	210	2/15/97	UNLV	9	77	24.3	.526	.356	.703	3.4	0.8	10.1	6.7	1.5	20.0
3	Chris Paul	G	6-0	175	5/06/85	Wake Forest	20	82	28.0	.427	.377	.924	3.6	7.4	8.8	6.2	12.7	15.1
8	Kris Dunn	G	6-3	205	3/18/94	Providence	9	74	24.1	.439	.335	.682	3.4	2.8	6.4	6.8	5.7	12.8
33	Nicolas Batum	G/F	6-8	230	12/14/88	Le Mans	17	78	17.5	.437	.433	.810	2.8	1.1	4.0	7.7	2.9	11.0
	TyTy Washington Jr.	G	6-3	195	11/15/01	Kentucky	3	16	7.4	.311	.190	.500	0.8	1.0	2.2	5.3	6.5	14.2
21	Kobe Brown	F	6-7	250	1/01/00	Missouri	2	40	6.8	.458	.231	.714	1.6	0.6	1.9	11.5	4.2	13.6
9	Trentyn Flowers	F	6-9	185	3/08/05	Adelaide	1	6	4.4	.364	.000	1.000	0.7	0.0	1.8	7.2	0.0	19.9
12	Cam Christie	G	6-6	190	7/24/05	Minnesota	1	13	4.5	.292	.154	.500	0.9	0.5	1.4	9.8	4.9	14.7
4	Kobe Sanders	G	6-9	207	5/30/02	Nevada												
14	Yanic Konan Niederhäuser	C	6-11	242	3/14/03	Penn State												



IVICA ZUBAC

22.8 points, 8.7 assists and 5.8 rebounds while shooting 35.2% from 3-point range. The Clippers actually wouldn't mind if Harden played fewer games, but he has been insistent upon playing anyway.

Beal will probably be the starter next to Harden, but he is coming off a down season with the Phoenix Suns. And if he and Harden are the starters, the Clippers defense won't be as good.

Dunn is the best defender the Clippers have in the backcourt, but his offense is average at best. Paul started all 82 games last season for the San Antonio Spurs, but he'll come off the bench for the Clippers, and he'll likely be held out of some games.

Bogdanović will push for playing time as well, having shown the Clippers after he arrived last season that he could run the offense and score. He averaged 11.4 points in 30 games with the team.

FINAL ANALYSIS

The Western Conference is crowded with several exceptional teams, but if the Clippers can stay healthy, they can be in the running for a top-six seed. A lot will depend on how the Clippers use Leonard and how healthy he remains. He's their best player, and he performs that way when he's able to be on the court.

The Clippers were one of the NBA's best defensive teams last season and will need to repeat that performance. They will have plenty of offense to rely upon, though.

Another thing the Clippers have going for them is Lue, who is one of the best head coaches in the business, and his experience and acumen should deliver a few extra wins.

2025-26 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 22	at Utah	9:00
Oct. 24	Phoenix	10:30
Oct. 26	Portland	9:00
Oct. 28	at Golden State	11:00
Oct. 31	New Orleans*	10:30

NOVEMBER

Nov. 3	Miami	10:30
Nov. 4	Oklahoma City	11:00
Nov. 6	at Phoenix	9:00
Nov. 8	Phoenix	10:30
Nov. 10	Atlanta	10:30
Nov. 12	Denver	10:30
Nov. 14	at Dallas*	8:30
Nov. 16	at Boston	3:30
Nov. 17	at Philadelphia	7:00
Nov. 20	at Orlando	7:00
Nov. 22	at Charlotte	1:00
Nov. 23	at Cleveland	6:00
Nov. 25	at L.A. Lakers*	11:00
Nov. 28	Memphis*	10:00
Nov. 29	Dallas	10:00

DECEMBER

Dec. 1	at Miami	7:30
Dec. 3	at Atlanta	7:30
Dec. 5	at Memphis	8:00
Dec. 6	at Minnesota	8:00
Dec. 9, 10	Emirates NBA Cup Quarterfinals	
Dec. 13	Emirates NBA Cup Semifinals	
Dec. 16	Emirates NBA Cup Championship	
Dec. 17	at Oklahoma City	8:00

Dec. 20	L.A. Lakers	10:30
Dec. 23	Houston	11:00
Dec. 26	at Portland	10:00
Dec. 28	Detroit	9:00
Dec. 30	Sacramento	11:00

JANUARY

Jan. 1	Utah	10:30
Jan. 3	Boston	10:30
Jan. 5	Golden State	10:00
Jan. 7	at New York	7:30
Jan. 9	at Brooklyn	7:30
Jan. 10	at Detroit	7:30
Jan. 12	Charlotte	10:30
Jan. 14	Washington	10:30
Jan. 16	at Toronto	7:30
Jan. 19	at Washington	3:00
Jan. 20	at Chicago	8:00
Jan. 22	L.A. Lakers	10:00
Jan. 25	Brooklyn	9:00
Jan. 27	at Utah	10:00
Jan. 30	at Denver	10:00

FEBRUARY

Feb. 1	at Phoenix	8:00
Feb. 2	Philadelphia	10:30
Feb. 4	Cleveland	10:30
Feb. 6	at Sacramento	10:00
Feb. 8	at Minnesota	3:00
Feb. 10	at Houston	8:00
Feb. 11	at Houston	8:00
Feb. 19	Denver	10:30
Feb. 20	at L.A. Lakers	10:00

Feb. 22	Orlando	9:00
Feb. 26	Minnesota	10:00

MARCH

March 1	New Orleans	9:00
March 2	at Golden State	10:00
March 4	Indiana	10:30
March 6	at San Antonio	9:30
March 7	at Memphis	8:00
March 9	New York	10:00
March 11	Minnesota	10:30
March 13	Chicago	10:30
March 14	Sacramento	10:30
March 16	San Antonio	10:30
March 18	at New Orleans	8:00
March 19	at New Orleans	8:00
March 21	at Dallas	8:30
March 23	Milwaukee	10:30
March 25	Toronto	10:30
March 27	at Indiana	7:00
March 29	at Milwaukee	3:30
March 31	Portland	11:00

APRIL

April 2	San Antonio	10:30
April 5	at Sacramento	9:00
April 7	Dallas	10:30
April 8	Oklahoma City	10:00
April 10	at Portland	10:00
April 12	Golden State	8:30

**Emirates NBA Cup regular-season game
All times Eastern*



LAKERS

PACIFIC DIVISION PREDICTION: **1ST**

However things shake out this season, LeBron James' status will suck all the air out of the room in Lakersland.

Will this, his 23rd campaign, be his last? Will he finish the season on the Lakers' roster? (He does have a no-trade clause in his contract that will pay him \$52.6 million in the final year of the deal.) Will he view the Lakers as championship contenders all season or will he make noise to try and force Lakers president of basketball operations Rob Pelinka acquire players of his choosing? Perhaps most importantly, will he still be as effective in his age-40 season?

So much will revolve around James, making him the center of attention as he nearly always is.

Whatever air is left in the room will be devoted to Luka Dončić, a transcendent superstar whom the Lakers acquired last season in a blockbuster trade with the Dallas Mavericks for Anthony Davis, among others.

The Lakers will need Dončić to be in tip-top shape if they are to have any opportunity to compete for an NBA championship. It has become the main criticism of this otherworldly talent.

But he knows the Lakers are all about winning championships, and he wants to join those other Laker teams to reach the mountaintop.

"It's an honor playing for this organization," Dončić says. "Many, many great players played here. So, obviously I want to add one more [banner] up there, so that's what we're working for."

FRONTCOURT

Even in his 22nd season, James was brilliant last season, posting 24.4 points, 7.8 rebounds and 8.2 assists per game over 34.9 minutes. He shot 51.3% from the field and 37.6% from 3-point range. Entering season 23 — his eighth with the Lakers — it'll be interesting to see what James has left in a tank that doesn't seem to be anywhere close to empty, even as he becomes the first player in NBA history to play a 23rd season.

With Dončić on board, James doesn't have to worry about running the offense as much as he has in the past. He'll be able to run the floor for dunks and layups and come off screens and pin-downs.

A bout of patellar tendinopathy limited Rui Hachimura to only 59 games last season. The Lakers will need him to stay healthy and be more productive. He has to be a better rebounder and defender. He'll get a lot of open corner 3s and will be counted on to knock those down consistently.

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Record: 42-30	Record: 33-49	Record: 43-39	Record: 47-35	Record: 50-32
Division: 3rd	Division: 4th	Division: 5th	Division: 3rd	Division: 1st

SCOUTING THE LAKERS

ANONYMOUS TAKES FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

"It will be interesting to see how LeBron [James] handles being second fiddle in the press. I'm guessing he doesn't mind on the court. ... I have a feeling Luka Dončić will get all the praise when they win and LeBron will take the blame when they lose. ... Narrative aside, the Deandre Ayton and Marcus Smart pickups could be huge. ... I'm not sure how much Smart has left, but he still gives them toughness to help match up with Oklahoma City. ... Not much will be expected of Ayton. I think he has a decent chance to succeed because of that. ... I don't know that they're in the top three or four teams in the West, but they could get to the Finals if everything goes perfectly."



LEBRON JAMES

FROM LEFT: JONATHAN HUI-IMAGN IMAGES; JAYNE KAMIN-ONCEA-IMAGN IMAGES



LUKA DONČIĆ



BEYOND THE ARC

IRON MAN LeBron

James is the NBA's all-time leading scorer with 42,184 points. He's only going to add to that record for as long as he plays. James is also 50 games away from breaking the NBA's all-time games played record held by Robert Parish (1,611). James enters his 23rd season having played in 1,562 games, meaning another league record is on the horizon.

LET IT FLY? The Lakers were ranked 19th in the NBA in 3-pointers attempted last season at 36.4 per game. But during the playoffs, they jumped to a tie for fourth in 3s taken at 38.8 per contest. Head coach JJ Redick wants his team to let it fly.

A MOTIVATED AYTON

Now that he's with the Lakers, Deandre Ayton wants to prove his doubters wrong. "Most definitely," he says. "It fuels me. It fuels me up completely. And it's a different type of drive that I've been wanting to express for a long time. I think this is the perfect timing, here in the purple and gold. And it's a platform that I cannot run from. I can show what I really am and just be around some greats to really emphasize that for me as well. It is a lot of fuel for me to prove to the whole world."



The Lakers were in desperate need of a center, and good fortune fell their way when the Portland Trail Blazers bought out Deandre Ayton, the No. 1 overall pick in the 2018 draft. The Lakers scooped up Ayton on a two-year deal to be their starting center. Ayton played in only 40 games last season for the Trail Blazers because of injuries. But his biggest question mark is maintaining consistency. At just 27, Ayton still has time to show that he can play up to his potential, something the Lakers will need out of the 7-foot center.

Jarred Vanderbilt will be the Lakers’ top reserve and one of their top defenders. He can guard multiple positions and is a hustle player who gives maximum effort.

Jaxson Hayes re-signed to be a backup center. Maxi Kleber will give the Lakers a stretch-five and good defender at the position.

BACKCOURT

Dončić and Austin Reaves will form one of the NBA’s more dynamic backcourts — offensively, at least. The duo can score with anyone, as they showed in combining for 48.4 points per game last season, to go along with 13.3 assists per contest. They will create massive problems for the opposition with their ability to shoot from long range, get into the teeth of the defense, find passing lanes for teammates and draw fouls.

But it is on the defensive end where both Dončić and Reaves have struggled. The Lakers can’t hide them both on defense, especially in the playoffs, when teams hunt out Dončić and Reaves for pick-and-rolls — like the Minnesota Timberwolves successfully did during a first-round playoff series win over the Lakers.

Dončić has committed to the Lakers for the near term, signing a three-year, \$165-million contract extension with a player option in the final season. That potentially keeps Dončić with the Lakers for the next few years and gives them the superstar player the organization always seems to have had over their history.

Dončić also worked hard to trim weight and to get in shape over the summer, two criticisms he

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The Lakers have won 17 NBA titles, putting them one behind the leaders and the Lakers’ nemesis, the Boston Celtics. LeBron James has said that he wants to compete for a championship in the twilight of his career; another title would give him five. Can this Lakers team win the franchise its 18th ring?



Deandre Ayton

OFFSEASON MOVES

DRAFT PICK

1 ADOU THIERO
G, 6-4, 220, Arkansas
Thiero didn’t play for the Lakers in the Summer League because of a left knee injury, but they still like his potential. He’s viewed as a great athlete, with many in the organization comparing him to the New York Knicks’ OG Anunoby.

OTHER NEWCOMERS
Besides picking up key players Deandre Ayton and Marcus Smart, the Lakers also signed free agent Jake LaRavia. LaRavia played in 66 games last season, split between the Memphis Grizzlies and Sacramento Kings. He’s a solid 3-point shooter, making 42.3% last season, but he averaged just 2.2 attempts per game.

ROSTER							2024-25 STATISTICS										48-MINUTE PRODUCTIVITY		
HEAD COACH: JJ REDICK (2ND SEASON; CAREER: 50-32)																			
#	PLAYER	POS	HT	WT	DOB	FROM	YRS	G	MPG	FG%	3P%	FT%	RPG	APG	PPG		REB	AST	PTS
77	Luka Dončić	F/G	6-6	230	2/28/99	Real Madrid	7	50	35.4	.450	.368	.782	8.2	7.7	28.2		11.1	10.4	38.2
23	LeBron James	F	6-9	250	12/30/84	St. Vincent-St. Mary (OH) HS	22	70	34.9	.513	.376	.782	7.8	8.2	24.4		10.7	11.3	33.6
15	Austin Reaves	G	6-5	197	5/29/98	Oklahoma	4	73	34.9	.460	.377	.877	4.5	5.8	20.2		6.2	7.9	27.8
5	Deandre Ayton	C	7-0	252	7/23/98	Arizona	7	40	30.1	.566	.188	.667	10.2	1.6	14.4		16.2	2.5	22.9
28	Rui Hachimura	F	6-8	230	2/08/98	Gonzaga	6	59	31.7	.509	.413	.770	5.0	1.4	13.1		7.6	2.1	19.9
4	Dalton Knecht	F	6-6	215	4/19/01	Tennessee	1	78	19.2	.461	.376	.762	2.8	0.8	9.1		6.9	2.1	22.7
36	Marcus Smart	G	6-3	220	3/06/94	Oklahoma State	11	34	20.0	.393	.348	.761	2.1	3.2	9.0		5.1	7.7	21.5
12	Jake LaRavia	F	6-7	235	11/03/01	Wake Forest	3	66	20.4	.475	.423	.678	3.9	2.4	6.9		9.2	5.6	16.3
11	Jaxson Hayes	C/F	7-0	220	5/23/00	Texas	6	56	19.5	.722	.000	.622	4.8	1.0	6.8		11.8	2.5	16.8
7	Gabe Vincent	G	6-2	200	6/14/96	UC-Santa Barbara	6	72	21.2	.400	.353	.714	1.3	1.4	6.4		2.9	3.1	14.5
2	Jarred Vanderbilt	F	6-8	214	4/03/99	Kentucky	7	36	16.1	.488	.281	.556	5.1	1.1	4.1		15.0	3.4	12.1
14	Maxi Kleber	F	6-10	240	1/29/92	Bayern Munich	8	34	18.7	.385	.265	.762	2.8	1.3	3.0		7.2	3.2	7.8
9	Bronny James	G	6-3	210	10/06/04	USC	1	27	6.7	.313	.281	.786	0.7	0.8	2.3		4.8	5.8	16.4
	R.J. Davis	G	6-0	180	10/21/01	North Carolina													
	Eric Dixon	F	6-8	255	1/26/01	Villanova													
	Arthur Kaluma	F	6-7	225	3/01/02	Texas													
	Chris Manon	G	6-5	215	12/09/01	Vanderbilt													
	Augustas Marčiulionis	G	6-4	200	3/21/02	Saint Mary's													
1	Adou Thiero	G	6-4	220	5/08/04	Arkansas													



AUSTIN REAVES

heard while playing for the Mavericks.

The Lakers were able to sign defensive ace Marcus Smart to a two-year deal after he got a buyout from the Washington Wizards. Smart was the NBA's Defensive Player of the Year for the 2021-22 season with the Boston Celtics, and he was first-team All-Defensive three times (2019, '20, '22). Smart's contributions on that end of the floor will be particularly important after the Lakers lost Dorian Finney-Smith, one of their top defenders last season, to the Houston Rockets.

Gabe Vincent is a solid veteran backup, and Dalton Knecht will try to get more playing time by showing he's more than just a very good outside shooter. Bronny James is in his second season and probably won't be a rotational player, but he did make some strides during the Summer League in Las Vegas.

FINAL ANALYSIS

The Lakers have two of the best players in the NBA in Dončić and James, and that in itself will make them a tough out. But the Lakers play in the Western Conference and will be hard-pressed to emerge from a crowded field and reach the NBA Finals.

JJ Redick is in his second season as head coach of the Lakers — his second season coaching professionally, for that matter — and he also will have to show improvement to get the most out of this team. “I can get a lot better,” Redick said after the season.

If Dončić plays at an MVP level as expected and James doesn't suffer a significant drop-off, the Lakers will be in the mix in the West for a top-six position.

2025-26 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 21	Golden State	10:00
Oct. 24	Minnesota	10:00
Oct. 26	at Sacramento	9:00
Oct. 27	Portland	10:30
Oct. 29	at Minnesota	9:30
Oct. 31	at Memphis*	9:30

NOVEMBER

Nov. 2	Miami	9:30
Nov. 3	at Portland	10:00
Nov. 5	San Antonio	10:00
Nov. 8	at Atlanta	8:00
Nov. 10	at Charlotte	7:00
Nov. 12	at Oklahoma City	9:30
Nov. 14	at New Orleans*	8:00
Nov. 15	at Milwaukee	8:00
Nov. 18	Utah	10:30
Nov. 23	at Utah	8:00
Nov. 25	L.A. Clippers*	11:00
Nov. 28	Dallas*	10:00
Nov. 30	New Orleans	9:30

DECEMBER

Dec. 1	Phoenix	10:00
Dec. 4	at Toronto	7:30
Dec. 5	at Boston	7:00
Dec. 7	at Philadelphia	7:30
Dec. 9, 10	Emirates NBA Cup Quarterfinals	
Dec. 13	Emirates NBA Cup Semifinals	
Dec. 16	Emirates NBA Cup Championship	
Dec. 18	at Utah	9:00
Dec. 20	at L.A. Clippers	10:30

Dec. 23	at Phoenix	9:00
Dec. 25	Houston	8:00
Dec. 28	Sacramento	9:30
Dec. 30	Detroit	10:30

JANUARY

Jan. 2	Memphis	10:30
Jan. 4	Memphis	9:30
Jan. 6	at New Orleans	8:00
Jan. 7	at San Antonio	7:30
Jan. 9	Milwaukee	10:30
Jan. 12	at Sacramento	10:00
Jan. 13	Atlanta	10:30
Jan. 15	Charlotte	10:30
Jan. 17	at Portland	10:00
Jan. 18	Toronto	9:30
Jan. 20	at Denver	10:00
Jan. 22	at L.A. Clippers	10:00
Jan. 24	at Dallas	8:30
Jan. 26	at Chicago	8:00
Jan. 28	at Cleveland	7:00
Jan. 30	at Washington	7:00

FEBRUARY

Feb. 1	at New York	7:00
Feb. 3	at Brooklyn	7:30
Feb. 5	Philadelphia	10:00
Feb. 7	Golden State	8:30
Feb. 9	Oklahoma City	10:00
Feb. 10	San Antonio	10:30
Feb. 12	Dallas	10:00
Feb. 20	L.A. Clippers	10:00
Feb. 22	Boston	6:30

Feb. 24	Orlando	10:30
Feb. 26	at Phoenix	9:00
Feb. 28	at Golden State	8:30

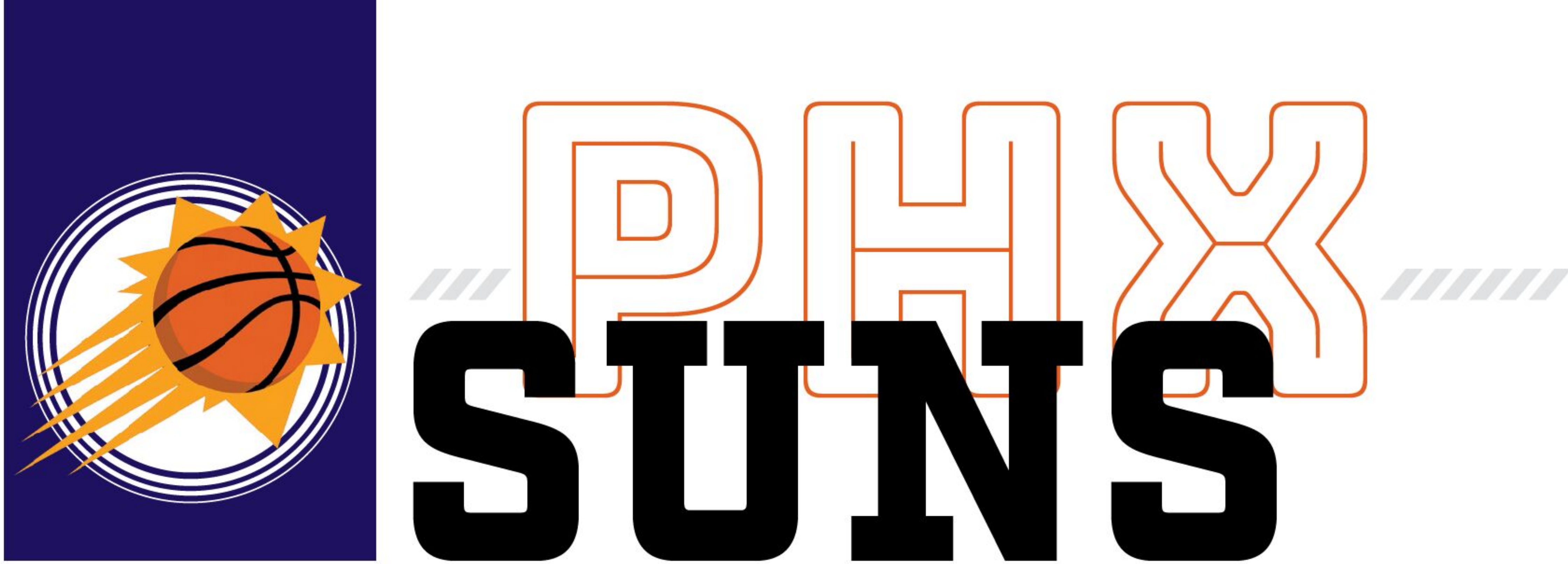
MARCH

March 1	Sacramento	9:30
March 3	New Orleans	10:30
March 5	at Denver	10:00
March 6	Indiana	10:30
March 8	New York	3:30
March 10	Minnesota	11:00
March 12	Chicago	10:30
March 14	Denver	8:30
March 16	at Houston	9:00
March 18	at Houston	9:30
March 19	at Miami	8:00
March 21	at Orlando	7:00
March 23	at Detroit	7:00
March 25	at Indiana	7:00
March 27	Brooklyn	10:30
March 30	Washington	10:00
March 31	Cleveland	10:30

APRIL

April 2	at Oklahoma City	7:30
April 5	at Dallas	7:30
April 7	Oklahoma City	10:30
April 9	at Golden State	10:00
April 10	Phoenix	10:30
April 12	Utah	8:30

**Emirates NBA Cup regular-season game
All times Eastern*



PACIFIC DIVISION PREDICTION: **5TH**

What *didn't* the Phoenix Suns do this offseason? They fired their veteran head coach (Mike Budenholzer) for a second consecutive year and hired a rising assistant coach (Jordan Ott). They managed their three star players differently — with a trade (Kevin Durant), a buyout (Bradley Beal) and a lucrative extension (Devin Booker).

They promoted a front office executive (Brian Gregory) to general manager after their previous GM (James Jones) joined the league office as executive VP/head of basketball operations. Instead of spending lavishly to win an NBA title immediately, the Suns cut costs to help them win an NBA title eventually.

Each move revealed the Suns' admission of their previously failed strategy. But did each move foreshadow the Suns finally pursuing the correct one?

For the past two seasons, Durant's injuries overshadowed his efficiency, and his salary limited the team's roster building. So Phoenix sent Durant to the Houston Rockets for an aggressive scorer (Jalen Green), a disruptive defender (Dillon Brooks) and the No. 10 draft pick that it used on a shot-blocker (Khaman Maluach).

The Suns' big-name hunting strategy didn't work with Beal, either. Like Durant, Beal suffered numerous injuries, and his earnings disrupted the team's roster flexibility. Unlike Durant, Beal struggled on the court both with sharing ball-handling duties and accepting a fluid role as a starter and reserve. The Suns still have to pay most of Beal's remaining \$110 million contract, but they escaped the first and second apron by negotiating back about \$13.9 million of his salary.

The Suns rewarded Booker with a two-year, \$145 million extension, a move they made to show loyalty, maintain competitiveness and ensure relevance. Phoenix also retained a free-agent point guard (Collin Gillespie), traded for another center (Mark Williams) and signed an undrafted forward (Nigel Hayes-Davis).

FRONTCOURT

The Suns should finally become a strong defensive team. After finishing 22nd out of 30 NBA teams last season in points allowed per game (116.6), the Suns have the personnel to make stops. At power forward, Brooks has become one of the NBA's most effective defenders, backing up his physicality and trash talking by defending opposing teams' top players in the paint and along the perimeter. Second-year player Ryan Dunn will likely start at small forward partly because his athleticism, size (6-foot-8, 216) and strength enable him to defend wing scorers effectively.

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Record: 51-21	Record: 64-18	Record: 45-37	Record: 49-33	Record: 36-46
Division: 1st	Division: 1st	Division: 2nd	Division: 2nd	Division: 5th

SCOUTING THE SUNS

ANONYMOUS TAKES FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

"I give them credit for trading Kevin Durant and buying out Bradley Beal. They're still headed nowhere, but at least they're saving money to get there. ... Devin Booker is a dynamic scorer and can light it up quickly. That said, I think the Suns will win more if he takes fewer shots. I'm incredibly interested to see how Jalen Green and Booker work in the backcourt. This may actually be a better fit for Green than Houston. ... Mark Williams was a really nice pickup. The Suns aren't nearly as splashy, but they may have actually improved. ... But anytime you have a first-time head coach [Jordan Ott], things are a bit of a mystery."



DILLON BROOKS

FROM LEFT: CARY EDMONDSON-IMAGN IMAGES; MARK J. REBILAS-IMAGN IMAGES



BEYOND THE ARC

DÉJÀ VU The Suns had already showed interest in acquiring Dillon Brooks in a trade in 2018. That trade fizzled amid a misunderstanding on which “Brooks” player was available. The Suns wanted Dillon. The Memphis Grizzlies would only send MarShon. “It was almost written in stone for me to be in Phoenix,” Dillon jokes.

FIRST IMPRESSION Brooks on what excites him for his Suns’ debut: “I can’t wait to get a technical foul.”

PAYING BETS After losing a one-on-one golf match to YouTube Gabby Golf Girl, Golden State Warriors star Stephen Curry owed a bet that entailed calling an NBA player and securing another match with the YouTube host. Curry spoke to Devin Booker on FaceTime and called him “the most amazing teammate that anybody could have” after they had won a gold medal together in the 2024 Paris Olympics. Booker accepted the challenge.

WHAT’S IN A NAME? Suns rookie guard Koby Brea confirms that his name’s origin traces back to the late Los Angeles Lakers star. “My dad was a huge Kobe [Bryant] fan growing up. So I was as well,” Brea says. “But he changed the last letter of my name just to make me different.”



DEVIN BOOKER

Brooks and Dunn should complement each other well. The emotional Brooks thrives on his intensity and by annoying his opponents. The soft-spoken Dunn focuses on defensive fundamentals. Those two can also camouflage some of Williams' shortcomings. Williams has become a dominant scorer at the rim, from mid-range and occasionally from deep. Williams lacks the mobility, however, to defend well. He also has a checkered injury history.

Maluach will likely play significant backup minutes to mitigate both issues. Inevitable rookie hiccups await, but Maluach became a lottery pick because he has already excelled as a rim protector. Royce O'Neale can also play a crucial bench role as a backup small forward to ease some pressure off Dunn.

BACKCOURT

Can the Suns' existing star (Booker) co-exist with a new one (Green)? Booker proved he could share scoring and ball-handling duties with Chris Paul (2000-23), Durant (2023-25) and Beal (2024-25). So much so that Booker posted a career high in assists per game last season (7.1) to go with 25.6 points per game.

Green cannot say the same thing. Though he excels with his driving and finishes at the rim, Green has struggled when he's not the primary ball-handler. During the Rockets' first-round exit vs. the Golden State Warriors, Green shot 37.2% from the field and 29.5% from 3 because he forced shots and struggled to make up for his poor shooting in other areas. Green argues that the two will mesh well because both players can attract double-teams, allowing them to punish the defense for leaving one of them open. That requires both scorers to make the right play, though.

Odds favor Booker fulfilling that role more consistently than Green. The two will produce a lot of offense, but it likely won't be as efficient and organized as it should be.

Beyond Booker and Green sharing scoring duties, reserves Gillespie and Grayson Allen can help with strong 3-point shooting and floor spacing.

\$145 MILLION

Devin Booker signed a two-year extension at that number, which represents the highest annual extension salary in NBA history. Booker's annual extension salary (\$72.5 million) also eclipsed Shai Gilgeous-Alexander's (\$71.25 million). Booker has five years and \$316 million left on his contract, and he plans to finish his career in Phoenix.



Jalen Green

OFFSEASON MOVES

- DRAFT PICKS
- 1 KHAMAN MALUACH
C, 7-2, 250, Duke
 - 2 RASHEER FLEMING
F, 6-9, 240, Saint Joseph's
 - 2 KOBY BREA
G, 6-7, 215, Kentucky
- Maluach will play the most minutes among the Suns' rookies because of his strong rim protection. Fleming and Brea should also receive some backup minutes to defend the perimeter and take some 3-pointers.
- OTHER NEWCOMERS
- Jalen Green provides extra scoring punch, but he has to prove he can mesh with Devin Booker. Dillon Brooks brings defensive toughness and veteran leadership. Mark Williams upgrades the center spot with his scoring around the rim and in the paint, but he has durability issues.

ROSTER							2024-25 STATISTICS										48-MINUTE PRODUCTIVITY		
HEAD COACH: JORDAN OTT (1ST SEASON; CAREER: 0-0)																			
#	PLAYER	POS	HT	WT	DOB	FROM	YRS	G	MPG	FG%	3P%	FT%	RPG	APG	PPG		REB	AST	PTS
1	Devin Booker	G	6-6	206	10/30/96	Kentucky	10	75	37.3	.461	.332	.894	4.1	7.1	25.6		5.2	9.1	33.0
4	Jalen Green	G	6-4	186	2/09/02	G League Ignite	4	82	32.9	.423	.354	.813	4.6	3.4	21.0		6.7	5.0	30.7
5	Mark Williams	C	7-0	240	12/16/01	Duke	3	44	26.6	.604	.000	.804	10.2	2.5	15.3		18.3	4.5	27.5
9	Dillon Brooks	G/F	6-6	225	1/22/96	Oregon	8	75	31.8	.429	.397	.818	3.7	1.7	14.0		5.5	2.6	21.2
8	Grayson Allen	G	6-4	198	10/08/95	Duke	7	64	24.1	.448	.426	.816	3.0	2.1	10.6		6.0	4.3	21.1
2	Nick Richards	C	7-0	245	11/29/97	Kentucky	5	57	22.0	.591	.000	.744	8.2	0.9	9.3		17.8	1.9	20.2
00	Royce O'Neale	F	6-6	226	6/05/93	Baylor	8	75	24.5	.423	.406	.731	4.7	2.2	9.1		9.1	4.3	17.8
12	Jared Butler	G	6-3	193	8/25/00	Baylor	4	60	17.4	.448	.355	.824	1.8	3.7	9.0		5.1	10.1	24.9
0	Ryan Dunn	F	6-8	216	1/07/03	Virginia	1	74	19.1	.430	.311	.487	3.6	0.8	6.9		9.1	1.9	17.4
12	Collin Gillespie	G	6-1	195	6/25/99	Villanova	2	33	14.0	.430	.433	.864	2.4	2.4	5.9		8.1	8.1	20.2
30	Jordan Goodwin	G	6-5	215	10/23/98	Saint Louis	4	29	18.7	.438	.382	.818	3.9	1.4	5.6		9.9	3.7	14.2
4	Oso Ighodaro	F	7-0	235	7/14/02	Marquette	1	61	17.1	.604	.000	.580	3.6	1.2	4.2		10.2	3.3	11.7
12	Isaiah Livers	F	6-6	232	7/28/98	Michigan	3	Injured — Missed Season											
40	Nigel Hayes-Davis	F	6-8	254	12/16/94	Wisconsin	1	Did Not Play NBA											
	Koby Brea	G	6-7	215	11/06/02	Kentucky		R — First NBA Season											
20	Rasheer Fleming	F	6-9	240	7/10/04	St. Joseph's		R — First NBA Season											
	CJ Huntley	C	6-11	221	1/06/02	Appalachian State		R — First NBA Season											
	Khaman Maluach	C	7-2	250	9/14/06	Duke		R — First NBA Season											



MARK WILLIAMS

FINAL ANALYSIS

The Suns are neither a championship-contending team nor even a dark-horse candidate. And that’s OK. The Suns fell at times into both categories in the past three seasons because of their star power, but their top-heavy roster left them vulnerable to persistent injuries, overlapping roles and an inconsistent supporting cast. The Suns don’t have such issues now.

Ott neither has the head-coaching experience nor the championship résumé that Budenholzer (2024-25) and Frank Vogel (2023-24) boasted, but he also doesn’t inherit championship-or-bust expectations. Although Suns owner Mat Ishbia has wanted to win an NBA title since acquiring the team in 2023, Ott can develop a fuller roster with more patience.

The Suns have less pressure partly because they have less short-term potential. Booker has led a team earlier in his career, but he doesn’t have the luxury anymore to plug-and-play with star talent. Green has improved, but not enough to be considered a winning player. It will take time for the younger players to develop.

Yet, the Suns could conceivably make the playoffs either as a sixth seed or through the Play-In Tournament. Booker has entered the prime of his career and has played brilliantly through every role. The Suns will improve significantly on defense. They will almost certainly experience fewer injuries. For whatever first-year hiccups Ott experiences as head coach, he will make up for it with enthusiasm, fresh ideas and strong preparation.

The Suns will avoid a lengthy rebuild but will need at least a season before becoming a contender. That dynamic will allow the Suns to stay competitive and develop organically without the boom-or-bust mentality that plagued the franchise in recent seasons.

2025-26 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 22	Sacramento	10:00
Oct. 24	at L.A. Clippers	10:30
Oct. 25	at Denver	9:00
Oct. 27	at Utah	9:00
Oct. 29	Memphis	10:00
Oct. 31	Utah*	10:00

NOVEMBER

Nov. 2	San Antonio	8:00
Nov. 4	at Golden State	10:00
Nov. 6	L.A. Clippers	9:00
Nov. 8	at L.A. Clippers	10:30
Nov. 10	New Orleans	9:00
Nov. 12	at Dallas	8:30
Nov. 13	Indiana	9:00
Nov. 16	Atlanta	8:00
Nov. 18	at Portland	11:00
Nov. 21	Minnesota*	9:00
Nov. 23	San Antonio	8:00
Nov. 24	Houston	9:30
Nov. 26	at Sacramento*	10:00
Nov. 28	at Oklahoma City*	9:30
Nov. 29	Denver	9:00

DECEMBER

Dec. 1	at L.A. Lakers	10:00
Dec. 5	at Houston	8:00
Dec. 8	at Minnesota	8:00
Dec. 9, 10	Emirates NBA Cup Quarterfinals	
Dec. 13	Emirates NBA Cup Semifinals	
Dec. 16	Emirates NBA Cup Championship	
Dec. 18	Golden State	9:00

Dec. 20	at Golden State	8:30
Dec. 23	L.A. Lakers	9:00
Dec. 26	at New Orleans	8:00
Dec. 27	at New Orleans	7:00
Dec. 29	at Washington	7:00
Dec. 31	at Cleveland	3:30

JANUARY

Jan. 2	Sacramento	9:00
Jan. 4	Oklahoma City	8:00
Jan. 5	at Houston	8:00
Jan. 7	at Memphis	8:00
Jan. 9	New York	9:00
Jan. 11	Washington	8:00
Jan. 13	at Miami	7:30
Jan. 15	at Detroit	7:00
Jan. 17	at New York	7:30
Jan. 19	at Brooklyn	7:30
Jan. 20	at Philadelphia	7:00
Jan. 23	at Atlanta	7:30
Jan. 25	Miami	8:00
Jan. 27	Brooklyn	9:00
Jan. 29	Detroit	9:00
Jan. 30	Cleveland	9:00

FEBRUARY

Feb. 1	L.A. Clippers	8:00
Feb. 3	at Portland	11:00
Feb. 5	Golden State	9:00
Feb. 7	Philadelphia	9:00
Feb. 10	Dallas	9:00
Feb. 11	Oklahoma City	9:00
Feb. 19	at San Antonio	8:30

Feb. 21	Orlando	5:00
Feb. 22	Portland	8:00
Feb. 24	Boston	9:00
Feb. 26	L.A. Lakers	9:00

MARCH

March 3	at Sacramento	11:00
March 5	Chicago	9:00
March 6	New Orleans	9:00
March 8	Charlotte	9:00
March 10	at Milwaukee	8:00
March 12	at Indiana	7:00
March 13	at Toronto	7:30
March 16	at Boston	8:00
March 17	at Minnesota	8:00
March 19	at San Antonio	8:00
March 21	Milwaukee	10:00
March 22	Toronto	9:00
March 24	Denver	11:00
March 28	Utah	10:00
March 30	at Memphis	8:00
March 31	at Orlando	7:00

APRIL

April 2	at Charlotte	7:00
April 5	at Chicago	3:30
April 7	Houston	11:00
April 8	Dallas	10:00
April 10	at L.A. Lakers	10:30
April 12	at Oklahoma City	8:30

**Emirates NBA Cup regular-season game
All times Eastern*



SAC KINGS

PACIFIC DIVISION PREDICTION: 4TH

No longer does the Sacramento Kings' identity revolve around "lighting the beam" and galvanizing the fan base with playoff potential. Two years after their first playoff appearance in 17 seasons, the Kings' identity revolves around some familiar themes that have often plagued the franchise.

They fired a veteran head coach (Mike Brown) only two seasons after he won the NBA's Coach of the Year award and one season after they granted him an extension. They mutually parted ways with a general manager (Monte McNair) who had won the NBA's Executive of the Year award two years earlier. They dealt their franchise player (De'Aaron Fox) amid his concerns about the team's direction.

It seems challenging enough to make the NBA playoffs amid a crowded Western Conference. Once again, the Kings also have to navigate instability with coaches, front office personnel and players. The Kings hope they can establish more tranquility, but they have many questions and few answers.

How will the Kings respond in their first full season without Fox? Can Kings head coach Doug Christie elevate the group after impressing the franchise as an interim coach last season (27-24)? Can first-year GM Scott Perry further revamp the roster and build on his extensive front-office experience with Sacramento, the New York Knicks, Orlando Magic and Detroit Pistons? Do the Kings have enough trusted veterans (Zach LaVine, DeMar DeRozan, Domantas Sabonis), young talent (Keegan Murray, Keon Ellis) and key role players (Dennis Schröder, Malik Monk) to compete?

FRONTCOURT

The Kings boast most of their talent in the frontcourt. At small forward, DeRozan has remained consistent with his scoring productivity, his availability and his positive locker room influence. At center, Sabonis has become one of the NBA's most versatile big men for his deft scoring touch, tenacious rebounding and passing instincts. At power forward, Murray has become effective through three seasons as a defender in the backcourt, frontcourt and occasionally at center. With more time together, their chemistry should blossom.

All three of those players also have shortcomings, though. DeRozan remains limited with his 3-point shooting and defense. Sabonis struggles with defending and staying aggressive offensively. Murray hasn't found his groove consistently from 3-point range. All three are good players, but they're not franchise-changing players.

The Kings have some frontcourt depth, but not enough to make

SCOUTING THE KINGS

ANONYMOUS TAKES FROM LEAGUE INSIDERS

"We all saw what the Bulls did with Zach LaVine and DeMar DeRozan as the top scoring options. I expect the Kings to fare about the same. ... Both players are brilliant, especially LaVine, but I still think they go as far as Domantas Sabonis can take them. He's gotta carry the load again. ... I don't think just adding younger players is gonna be the solution. But they're probably not getting much in a trade for LaVine or DeRozan, and I wouldn't move Keegan Murray. He's vastly underrated. ... So they seem to be stuck in the same gear they were last season. Maybe Dennis Schröder can help change that. He's pretty good for a guy who can't stay with one team."



ZACH
LAVINE

FIVE-YEAR WIN TREND

2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Record: 31-41	Record: 30-52	Record: 48-34	Record: 46-36	Record: 40-42
Division: 5th	Division: 5th	Division: 1st	Division: 4th	Division: 4th



DOMANTAS SABONIS

BEYOND THE ARC

NO SECOND-GUESSING

After the Kings acquired him via sign-and-trade from the Chicago Bulls, DeMar DeRozan lost his top teammate (De'Aaron Fox) and his head coach (Mike Brown) and missed out on a postseason appearance. Any regrets? "I don't regret anything," DeRozan said. "I don't think you can live life with regrets. You just try to learn from it."

FULL COMMITMENT Despite frustration with the Kings' struggles, Domantas Sabonis, Zach LaVine and Keegan Murray have all expressed interest in staying with the organization. LaVine and Murray are eligible for extensions before the 2025-26 season. It appears that the Kings remain committed to Murray, whom they selected fourth overall in the 2022 NBA Draft. That's not necessarily the case for the 30-year-old LaVine, who has two years left on his contract.

PLAN AHEAD In between training, Murray stayed busy this past season with wedding planning before marrying his fiancée, Carly Printy. How did Murray manage the large workload? Said Murray: "I've been sitting in the [planning] meetings. But she's been doing pretty much most of it."

NO JOKING AROUND

Whenever he needs a reminder on how to compete, Kings rookie Nique Clifford stares at his left forearm. There, he has a tattoo of the Joker, the Batman villain. "It's a mentality just to be almost a killer when you're on the court," Clifford says. "You can't care what people think about you. You just have to go hard and go do what you're supposed to do and take care of business."

SACRAMENTO KINGS

a serious difference. Rookie Nique Clifford and veteran Doug McDermott will likely play some minutes as reserve small forwards. Clifford should continue to grow as a versatile scorer, playmaker and perimeter defender. McDermott remains an effective outside shooter. Clifford will need time, though, to improve his ball-handling amid the league’s speed and physicality. McDermott offers little else besides 3-pointers, hitting 43.6% of his attempts last season.

As in previous seasons, Murray could be stretched thin as a defender because he lacks help behind him. Dario Šarić’s playing time has plummeted in recent seasons because of his lack of athleticism, poor lateral quickness and inconsistent shooting. Although second-year forward Isaac Jones has excelled as a finisher and rebounder, he needs more time to develop the rest of his game.

The Kings hope that rookie Maxime Raynaud can develop quickly enough to become a consistent backup center. Raynaud has the potential to become a complete center, but he may need some time to develop consistency. Drew Eubanks has limitations with his mobility, which affects his scoring, defensive rotations and rebounding.

BACKCOURT

The Kings’ biggest weakness is the point guard position. That has been the case since the team traded Fox to the San Antonio Spurs midway through the 2024-25 season in a three-team deal that yielded them LaVine, Sidy Cissoko, three future first-round picks and three future second-round picks.

Sacramento addressed that hole this offseason by signing Schröder. He has enjoyed a prolific 12-year career with his scoring, playmaking and defense by relying on his speed and aggressiveness. But Schröder’s approach can also yield diminishing returns — he has become unpredictable with his 3-point shooting, turnovers and defensive rotations.

Monk could compete for starter’s minutes because of his familiarity with the Kings, his aggressive scoring and his positive energy. But he has become more effective and consistent as a reserve than as a starter. The same argument can be made for Schröder, who was runner-up for Sixth Man of

13

The Sacramento Kings have had 13 head coaches since 2006. Included in that run of futility was the Kings’ 16-year playoff drought (2007-22). Former Kings head coach Mike Brown won the NBA’s Coach of the Year award in 2023 partly for ending that streak, but the Kings fired him following a 13-18 start to the 2024-25 season.



Dennis Schröder

OFFSEASON MOVES

DRAFT PICKS

1 NIQUE CLIFFORD

G, 6-5, 175, Colorado State

2 MAXIME RAYNAUD

C, 7-1, 250, Stanford

Clifford developed his perimeter defense, outside shooting and emotional maturity through five years in college at Colorado (2020-23) and Colorado State (2023-25). He intrigued the Kings enough that they traded a protected 2027 first-round pick to the Oklahoma City Thunder to move up in the draft. Raynaud has potential to rise above Drew Eubanks on the depth chart because of his balanced floor game as a defender, rebounder, post-up player and 3-point shooter.

OTHER NEWCOMERS

Dennis Schröder is the only impactful acquisition; his playmaking and defense can at least mitigate De’Aaron Fox’s departure. Dario Šarić and Eubanks are limited.

ROSTER							2024-25 STATISTICS										48-MINUTE PRODUCTIVITY		
HEAD COACH: DOUG CHRISTIE (2ND SEASON; CAREER: 27-24)																			
#	PLAYER	POS	HT	WT	DOB	FROM	YRS	G	MPG	FG%	3P%	FT%	RPG	APG	PPG		REB	AST	PTS
8	Zach LaVine	G	6-5	200	3/10/95	UCLA	11	74	35.2	.511	.446	.825	4.3	4.2	23.3		5.8	5.7	31.8
10	DeMar DeRozan	G/F	6-6	220	8/07/89	USC	16	77	35.9	.477	.328	.857	3.9	4.4	22.2		5.2	5.9	29.7
11	Domantas Sabonis	F/C	6-10	240	5/03/96	Gonzaga	9	70	34.7	.590	.417	.754	13.9	6.0	19.1		19.2	8.4	26.4
0	Malik Monk	G	6-3	200	2/04/98	Kentucky	8	65	31.6	.439	.325	.865	3.8	5.6	17.2		5.7	8.5	26.1
17	Dennis Schröder	G	6-1	175	9/15/93	Braunschweig	12	75	28.1	.406	.342	.838	2.6	5.4	13.1		4.5	9.2	22.3
13	Keegan Murray	F	6-8	225	8/19/00	Iowa	3	76	34.3	.444	.343	.833	6.7	1.4	12.4		9.3	2.0	17.3
23	Keon Ellis	G	6-4	175	1/08/00	Alabama	3	80	24.4	.489	.433	.849	2.7	1.5	8.3		5.2	3.0	16.4
17	Drew Eubanks	F/C	6-10	245	2/01/97	Oregon State	7	61	12.2	.593	.500	.662	3.7	0.9	4.6		14.5	3.5	18.0
22	Devin Carter	G	6-2	195	3/18/02	Providence	1	36	11.0	.370	.295	.591	2.1	1.1	3.8		9.2	5.0	16.7
7	Doug McDermott	F	6-6	225	1/03/92	Creighton	11	42	8.1	.427	.436	.600	0.5	0.2	3.5		3.1	1.0	20.7
9	Dario Šarić	F/C	6-10	225	4/08/94	Anadolu Efes	8	16	13.1	.362	.269	.700	3.1	1.4	3.5		11.4	5.2	12.8
3	Isaac Jones	F	6-9	245	7/11/00	Washington State	1	40	7.6	.651	.375	.639	1.4	0.3	3.4		9.0	1.9	21.2
	Isaiah Stevens	G	6-0	185	11/01/00	Colorado State	1	3	1.9	.000	.000	.000	0.7	0.0	0.0		17.3	0.0	0.0
3	Terence Davis	G	6-4	201	5/16/97	Ole Miss	5	1	7.9	.000	.000	.000	1.0	1.0	0.0		6.1	6.1	0.0
	Dylan Cardwell	C	6-11	255	12/16/01	Auburn				R — First NBA Season									
5	Nique Clifford	G	6-5	175	2/09/02	Colorado State				R — First NBA Season									
42	Maxime Raynaud	C	7-1	250	4/07/03	Stanford				R — First NBA Season									



DEMAR DEROZAN

the Year in 2019-20. The reason: Both players are more productive in limited minutes, while extended runs expose their weaknesses. That leaves the Kings without a definitive starting point guard but with two elite reserve guards.

At least the Kings don't have many concerns at shooting guard. Last season, LaVine posted his sixth-best scoring season (23.3 ppg) and fourth-best season in assists (4.2 apg). LaVine also averaged career highs in shooting percentage (51.1%) and 3-point shooting (44.6%). After right ankle and right foot injuries limited him to only 25 games in the 2023-24 season in Chicago, LaVine played in 74 games last season. With a full training camp and better health, the 30-year-old LaVine has a chance to eclipse his career highs this season in points, assists, shooting and games played.

Ellis, a fourth-year guard, has emerged as a dependable backup for his perimeter defense, outside shooting and overall energy. Ellis' versatility could enable LaVine to play some minutes at point guard.

FINAL ANALYSIS

The Kings are not good enough to make the playoffs, and they are not bad enough to tank. To make this an effective gap season, two things need to happen: The Kings' core and role players need to develop significantly, and the team needs to remain opportunistic in future trades both on the margins and big deals, even if the latter entails breaking up their core.

That dynamic leaves the Kings in a dicey situation. They could perform better with more stability and continuity. Christie has the respect and expertise to succeed as the head coach. Perry has enough experience with various front offices. But if the Kings stick to the status quo, they will stay stuck in the middle of the Western Conference. They simply don't have the talent and depth needed to make a playoff push.

2025-26 SCHEDULE

OCTOBER

Oct. 22	at Phoenix	10:00
Oct. 24	Utah	10:00
Oct. 26	L.A. Lakers	9:00
Oct. 28	at Oklahoma City	8:00
Oct. 29	at Chicago	8:00

NOVEMBER

Nov. 1	at Milwaukee	5:00
Nov. 3	at Denver	9:00
Nov. 5	Golden State	10:00
Nov. 7	Oklahoma City*	10:00
Nov. 9	Minnesota	9:00
Nov. 11	Denver	11:00
Nov. 12	Atlanta	10:00
Nov. 14	at Minnesota*	8:00
Nov. 16	at San Antonio	4:00
Nov. 19	at Oklahoma City	8:00
Nov. 20	at Memphis	8:00
Nov. 22	at Denver	10:00
Nov. 24	Minnesota	10:00
Nov. 26	Phoenix*	10:00
Nov. 28	at Utah*	9:30
Nov. 30	Memphis	9:00

DECEMBER

Dec. 3	at Houston	8:00
Dec. 6	at Miami	8:00
Dec. 8	at Indiana	7:00
Dec. 9, 10	Emirates NBA Cup Quarterfinals	
Dec. 13	Emirates NBA Cup Semifinals	
Dec. 16	Emirates NBA Cup Championship	
Dec. 18	at Portland	10:00

Dec. 20	Portland	10:00
Dec. 21	Houston	10:00
Dec. 23	Detroit	10:00
Dec. 27	Dallas	5:00
Dec. 28	at L.A. Lakers	9:30
Dec. 30	at L.A. Clippers	11:00

JANUARY

Jan. 1	Boston	10:00
Jan. 2	at Phoenix	9:00
Jan. 4	Milwaukee	9:00
Jan. 6	Dallas	11:00
Jan. 9	at Golden State	10:00
Jan. 11	Houston	9:00
Jan. 12	L.A. Lakers	10:00
Jan. 14	New York	10:00
Jan. 16	Washington	10:00
Jan. 18	Portland	9:00
Jan. 20	Miami	10:00
Jan. 21	Toronto	10:00
Jan. 23	at Cleveland	7:30
Jan. 25	at Detroit	3:00
Jan. 27	at New York	7:30
Jan. 29	at Philadelphia	7:00
Jan. 30	at Boston	7:30

FEBRUARY

Feb. 1	at Washington	6:00
Feb. 4	Memphis	10:00
Feb. 6	L.A. Clippers	10:00
Feb. 7	Cleveland	10:00
Feb. 9	at New Orleans	8:00
Feb. 11	at Utah	9:00

Feb. 19	Orlando	10:00
Feb. 21	at San Antonio	8:00
Feb. 23	at Memphis	8:00
Feb. 25	at Houston	8:00
Feb. 26	at Dallas	8:30

MARCH

March 1	at L.A. Lakers	9:30
March 3	Phoenix	11:00
March 5	New Orleans	10:00
March 8	Chicago	9:00
March 10	Indiana	10:00
March 11	Charlotte	10:00
March 14	at L.A. Clippers	10:30
March 15	Utah	10:00
March 17	San Antonio	11:00
March 19	Philadelphia	10:00
March 22	Brooklyn	6:00
March 24	at Charlotte	7:00
March 26	at Orlando	7:00
March 28	at Atlanta	7:30
March 29	at Brooklyn	6:00

APRIL

April 1	at Toronto	8:00
April 3	New Orleans	10:00
April 5	L.A. Clippers	9:00
April 7	at Golden State	10:00
April 10	Golden State	10:00
April 12	at Portland	8:30

**Emirates NBA Cup regular-season game
All times Eastern*

2025-26 NBA FANTASY PREVIEW

THE ATHLON SPORTS BIG BOARD

BY
SLOAN PIVA

Here's the Athlon Sports big board for the 2025-26 fantasy hoops season, with 144 players in the NBA universe ranked to accommodate 12-team, nine-category leagues with 12-man rosters.

After reading the rankings, be sure to check out Athlon's late-draft values as well as the sleepers, breakouts and busts section. With so many injuries to All-Stars and lots of key fantasy assets changing teams this offseason, it's never been more crucial to have a firm grasp of every player's value before drafting a team. We're here to help.

Now, let's get to the rankings for the 2025-26 season.

1. NIKOLA JOKIĆ, C, NUGGETS Remember last year when we warned you against taking Wemby over Joker? Well, the song remains the same. Jokić averaged a 29.6/12.7/10.2 triple-double in his age-29 season, finishing with career highs in points per game, steals per game (1.8) and 3-point percentage (41.7%). He also shot well from the line (80%), and he made it 10/10 seasons without missing more than 13 games. He's the most valuable player in fantasy sports.

2. VICTOR WEMBANYAMA, C, SPURS Wemby remains the best consolation prize in fantasy, as anyone would be elated to land him at No. 2 overall. He sadly missed 36 games last season, but he proved his all-around dominance when he played. Averaging 24.3 points, 11 rebounds, 3.7 assists and a league-leading 3.8 blocks per game is sick enough — but shooting 47.6/35.2/83.6 in the process makes him seem almost unfair. He's truly an alien.

3. SHAI GILGEOUS-ALEXANDER, G, THUNDER SGA didn't let us down after we ranked him third overall last season. His MVP campaign saw him lead the league in scoring, free throws made (while shooting 89.8%) and total steals. He also ranked 11th in assists, so check your head if you're thinking of calling him a ball hog. He's the main catalyst on the best team in basketball, and he's played 75-plus games two seasons in a row.

4. LUKA DONČIĆ, G, LAKERS Like the three players ahead of him, Dončić slides in exactly where he was ranked one year ago. He's the main man in Los Angeles now, and he appears to be in the best shape of his NBA career. We can't blame you if you opt to take him as high as third overall.

5. GIANNIS ANTETOKOUNMPO, F/C, BUCKS The Bucks hit the reset button in the offseason, but Giannis remains the face of the team. At this point, the negativity around his free-throw shooting seems overblown. As long as he's averaging around 30/12/7 with a block and a steal, he's a no-brainer to keep on the fantasy elite list.



6. ANTHONY DAVIS, F/C, MAVERICKS

A healthy AD could go scorched-earth in 2025, perhaps putting up similar numbers to his 2023 campaign with L.A. (24.7 PPG, 12.6 RPG, 2.3 BPG and 1.2 SPG). He's the man in Dallas, and his usage rate should be very high until Kyrie Irving returns from injury. Here's hoping Davis can keep himself off the injury report, the only real concern fantasy managers ever have with him.

7. TRAE YOUNG, G, HAWKS

If you're punting turnovers and field-goal percentage (a very fun double-punt strategy), Trae is a fantastic name to target. He can score 24 points per game in his sleep, and he just led the NBA in assists despite everyone around him getting hurt. He's a career 87.3% free-throw shooter who makes three treys per game and just logged 76 total games.

**8. CADE CUNNINGHAM, G, PISTONS**

We ranked the MotorCade as our favorite breakout candidate of 2024-25, and he proceeded to finish seventh in MVP voting. He pretty much does it all: counting stats (26.1 PPG, 9.1 APG, 6.1 RPG), percentages (46.9/35.6/84.6) and defense (1.0 SPG and 0.8 BPG). Oh, and he just played a career-high 70 regular-season games and led Detroit to its first postseason berth since 2019. He's no longer a steal, but he's plenty capable of being a first-round anchor. Don't sleep!

9. STEPHEN CURRY, G, WARRIORS If it wasn't for the fact that he's 37, he might be ranked in the top six. Curry remains one of the most electric players in the

Association, having just finished No. 1 in the NBA in 3-pointers per game (4.4) for the 10th time in 13 seasons. He also won his fifth free-throw percentage title (93.3), and his final averages on the season (24.5/6.0/4.4) basically mirrored his career averages. Most importantly, he reached 70 regular-season games for the second consecutive year, a feat he hadn't managed since the days of the dynasty Dubs.

10. KEVIN DURANT, F, ROCKETS

Speaking of ageless wonders, KD just landed with a 52-30 Houston team that finished second in a loaded Western Conference — and he's easily their go-to player from Day 1. Head coach Ime Udoka and his young gunners will be looking to the pure-scoring future Hall of Famer early and often, and the fact that he's shooting so well from 3-point land (43% last season) should save him from overexerting game in and game out.

11. ANTHONY EDWARDS, G, TIMBERWOLVES

Ant-Man tied the aforementioned Cunningham in MVP voting last season (7th), and he proceeded to lift Minnesota to its second straight Western Conference finals appearance. He finished fourth in scoring (27.6) and second in 3s per game (4.1), and he shot a career-best 39.5% from deep. He's just not as good a rebounder as Cade, and he's a far worse passer — and his defensive abilities aren't neces-

sarily reflected in his steals and blocks numbers (1.2/0.6). In an era loaded with scorers, it's hard to justify picking a player in the top 10 if he shoots 44.7% from the field and averages 5.7 boards and 4.5 assists per game. He's close, though.

12. DOMANTAS SABONIS, C, KINGS

One of the hardest-working and most underappreciated bigs in NBA history, Domas just won his third straight rebounding title (13.9 RPG!) and also paced the league in double-doubles (61) for the third season in a row. He also shot a career-best 75.4% from the line and 41.7% from 3-point land. He remains insanely durable — he has played 231 of 246 regular-season games since 2022-23 — and he's one of the better

passing centers in the league. Remember: Sexiness doesn't win fantasy leagues — stats do!

13. DEVIN BOOKER, G, SUNS With KD and Bradley Beal gone, Book can go back to being the headlining star in the Valley night in and night out. He's also probably the Suns' starting point guard, so the assist production might actually go up from the career-high 7.1 per game he logged last season. Another promising sign? He played 75 games, his most since his second season in the NBA. Will the healthy streak last? Can he rebound from a 33.2% 3-point shooting campaign? What if the Suns stink? Lots of questions.

14. JAMES HARDEN, G, CLIPPERS

Another guy 35 or older making our top 15, Harden just keeps giving us reasons to draft him early. His resurgent 2024-25 campaign saw him put up his best scoring average (22.8) since 2020-21 and most treys (3.0) and steals (1.5) per game since '19-20. Oh, and he played a whopping 79 games. The Clippers got better this offseason, so The Beard should be plenty motivated to put up more numbers in his 17th year.

15. JALEN WILLIAMS, F, THUNDER

Cue all the Scottie Pippen comparisons. Williams is the clear No. 2 on the best team in the world, and he can do just about everything well. It's quite possible that he'll just continue to get better at 24.

16. KARL-ANTHONY TOWNS, F/C, KNICKS

It's hard not to love what the Zesty One did for the Knicks last year. KAT put up 24.4 points per game, his best scoring output since the 2021-22 season, and he grabbed a career-high 12.8 rebounds. He also shot 42% from deep and averaged a steal per game, both near his career highs. The only thing that gives us pause: Tom Thibodeau is out, so 35 minutes per game might be a thing of the past for KAT.

17. CHET HOLMGREN, F/C, THUNDER

Talk about a tough player to rank. Folks who grabbed him for his redshirt rookie year got 82 games of 16.5 PPG, 8.0 RPG and 2.3 BPG goodness. Those looking for an encore got just 32 games in 2024-25. His per-game counting stats were still just as good as the previous year, but you're not winning many leagues when your second-round pick misses 50 games. Whether you take the high-risk, high-reward approach or avoid the potential nuisance, good luck!

18. TYRESE MAXEY, G, 76ERS With or without Joel Embiid, Maxey will be doing his thing. The All-Star enjoyed a

career-best 26.3 points and 1.8 steals per game last season before sustaining a finger injury that basically put the Sixers' season out of its misery. Mad Maxey will be ready for October, though, and he will help in all categories except FG%, rebounds, blocks and turnovers.

19. DONOVAN MITCHELL, G, CAVALIERS Spida obviously doesn't yield the same type of fantasy upside as most of the guys above him on this list, but he's so consistently good that he remains about as safe a second-round pick as they come. His field-goal percentage and counting stats dipped a bit last season, but that can happen in a player's eighth year of high usage.

20. JALEN BRUNSON, G, KNICKS Speaking of eighth seasons, Brunson embarks upon his in 2025-26, but it's just his fifth as a full-time starter. He's been as steady as they come in his three campaigns as a Knick, and he actually finished '24-25 with a career-best 7.3 assists per game. His 3-point and free-throw shooting percentages declined a bit, but that could be due to some nagging injuries throughout the season. New head coach Mike Brown loves him a clutch player — LeBron James' first MVP campaign helped him win Coach of the Year, and he rode De'Aaron Fox's Clutch Player of the Year season to his second. Brunson will be Brown's main man in Manhattan.

21. LEBRON JAMES, F, LAKERS This seems like a good year for Bron to go for one last title and ride off into the sunset. That means he will actually need to play, as the Lakers haven't exactly fared well against higher seeds in the postseason during LeBron's tenure. He played at least 70 games in each of his past two seasons, and he just posted averages of 24.4/7.8/8.2, so we can't imagine drafting the 40-year-old much later than this point.

22. LAMELO BALL, G, HORNETS At least Penny Hardaway gave NBA fans a few full seasons before injuries took over. Melo has logged games-played totals of 51, 75, 36, 22 and 47. When he plays, he's a majestic source of scoring, assists, 3s and free-throw percentage. When he doesn't, he feels like yet another regret of a second-round pick.

23. BAM ADEBAYO, F/C, HEAT Bam has been Mr. Reliable for the Heat, and in an injury-ravaged league, he's a strong pick at the tail-end of the second round. Averages of 18-10-4 with two stocks

(steals plus blocks) seem like locks at this point, and he's coming off a 78-game age-27 season, so you know durability isn't a major concern. Maybe he'll even build upon his improved 3-point shooting (he hit 79-of-221 attempts last season after hitting just eight total over his first six seasons).

24. EVAN MOBLEY, F/C, CAVALIERS We called Mobley's breakout last season, and we're calling him a third-round value this season. His 3-point shooting bumped up his per-game scoring output from 15.7 to 18.5, while his rebounding (9.3), assists (3.2), blocks (1.6) and steals (0.9) per game all remained rock solid. Oh, and like the aforementioned JDub, he's just 24!

25. JAYLEN BROWN, G/F, CELTICS The OG of the Jays will be without running mate Jayson Tatum this season, giving Brown an opportunity to run the show for Joe Mazzulla. High turnovers and low blocks and shooting percentages will keep him out of the first two rounds, but he's a solid fantasy contributor just about everywhere else.



26. DERRICK WHITE, G, CELTICS You can call this ranking crazy all you want, but we know what White can do with this kind of usage-boost opportunity (his PPG has increased in each of his past three seasons in Boston). With Tatum out for the season and Jrue Holliday traded, DWhite could easily wind up landing his first All-Star appearance and a first-team All-Defensive selection. @ me if you want (@SloanPiva).

27. AMEN THOMPSON, G/F, ROCKETS Yes, a dude who can't shoot well is

ranked 27th. That's how good he is at everything else. He was a top-20 9-cat player the last month of 2024-25.

28. JALEN JOHNSON, F, HAWKS Like we said last year: "A very underrated fantasy asset." Averages of 19/10/5 with 1.6 steals and a block!? With 50% field-goal shooting!? Yeah, sign us up.

29. SCOTTIE BARNES, G/F, RAPTORS Most of the counting stats look pristine with Barnesy. However, the games played are usually a letdown, and the shooting percentages and lack of 3-pointers will keep him from yielding first-round value anytime soon.

30. DE'AARON FOX, G, SPURS Fox remains a force, even when he's dealing with tendon issues in his finger. He won't light it up with 3s, field-goal percentage or blocks, but he's a solid contributor in just about every other category. The Spurs have a lot of young talent, but he's the straw that stirs the drink in San Antonio.

31. ALPEREN ŞENGÜN, C, ROCKETS He's really good, even if he will probably never be the best player on a contender. The man affectionately called "Baby Jokić" should benefit from KD's arrival in H-Town, and he will continue to reward fantasy managers with double-digit rebounds, 50% field-goal shooting, five assists and a couple stocks per game.

32. DARIUS GARLAND, G, CAVALIERS This could be the year that Garland jumps from two-time All-Star to second-team All-NBA. He's right on the verge, and the Cavs have a good chance of destroying the East this season if he stays healthy.

33. KAWHI LEONARD, F, CLIPPERS Kawhi could deliver major results if he could

play 65 games. He's done that once in the past eight years, though, so hold your breath if you dive in.

34. JIMMY BUTLER, F, WARRIORS Highly motivated, Butler has another couple of strong seasons left. He's even shooting some 3s these days, so the only negative besides injury risk is the lack of blocks.

35. JAREN JACKSON JR., F/C, GRIZZLIES JJJ underwent a procedure for turf toe in July, but he should be ready for the season. He's a defensive wizard who hits a couple treys per game and keeps his field-goal percentage up.

Rebounding, assists and free-throw percentage remain underwhelming, though.

36. PAOLO BANCHERO, F/C, MAGIC The addition of Desmond Bane might hurt Banchero's counting stats a bit — and Banchero will probably never be a plus-percentage or low-turnover player — but it's hard to complain about a guy who just averaged close to 26/8/5.

37. JOSH GIDDEY, G, BULLS We called his career resurgence last year. Dude averaged a triple-double his last month of 2024-25. We're drafting him well before his ADP.

38. DYSON DANIELS, G/F, HAWKS Some might call him the "steal" of last year's draft. He's a pretty great catch anywhere after the third round this year, too.

39. TYLER HERRO, G, HEAT When he's healthy, he fills it up. Last year, he averaged 24/5/6 with shooting splits of 47/38/88. Some regression will come.

40. JA MORANT, G, GRIZZLIES Yet another high-risk fantasy asset with a massive ceiling if all goes well (all rarely seems to go well).

41. DESMOND BANE, G/F, MAGIC The Magic needed him, and he needed the Magic. It should be a nice fit.

42. FRED VANVLEET, G, ROCKETS FVV's getting old, and he will cede plenty of usage to KD.

43. FRANZ WAGNER, F, MAGIC 24/6/5 last season, all improvements from the year prior (20/5/4). If this dude figures out his 3-point shot, he's an All-NBA player.

44. IMMANUEL QUICKLEY, G, RAPTORS Be a high-IQ fantasy manager ... don't sleep on Quickley.

45. LAURI MARKKANEN, F, JAZZ Like we said about Markkanen last year, "boring doesn't mean devoid of value." He yields plenty of fantasy value if he can have a healthy season.

46. JAMAL MURRAY, G, NUGGETS That pesky first All-Star season will come. (Won't it!?)

47. MYLES TURNER, C, BUCKS Old reliable fantasy man. He should feast in Milwaukee.

48. PASCAL SIAKAM, F/C, PACERS Temper expectations — Spicy P is a very good player, but not a great No. 1 option.

49. COOPER FLAGG, F, MAVERICKS Flagg is fantastic at so many things, but he's not going to be an immediate fantasy league-winner like so many people seem to think.

50. WALKER KESSLER, C, JAZZ The breakout came! You can set your clock to 2.3 blocks per game, but 11 points and 12 rebounds with 1.7 assists? On 66.3% shooting? As Borat would say, "Very nice!"

51. JARRETT ALLEN, C, CAVALIERS Super-solid big-man stats.

52. JALEN DUREN, C, PISTONS We're not giving up on our perennial breakout pick.

53. DENI AVDIJA, F, TRAIL BLAZERS He's so friggin' good, and so few people realize it because his two pro teams have been the Wizards and Blazers.

54. OG ANUNOBY, F, KNICKS Here's banking on Mike Brown realizing OG is better than Mikal Bridges in, like, every possible way.

55. JOEL EMBIID, C, 76ERS He seems like the Derrick Rose of big men at this point. JoJo started this half-decade with two straight MVP runner-ups and an MVP win, and then closed it out with a 39-game season followed by a 19-game season. You know what you're getting if he stays even remotely healthy: a scoring champ and walking double-double with passing chops and DPOY upside. But it can all disappear fast, as we have sadly learned on multiple occasions.

56. DEMAR DEROZAN, F, KINGS No reason to expect a big dropoff in production just because he's 36. He stays in great shape, and midrange proficiency/mechanics age well.

57. PAUL GEORGE, G/F, 76ERS He's so widely hated as a fantasy asset that he's becoming a steal in many drafts.

58. ZION WILLIAMSON, F, PELICANS Tough to trust but electric when active.

59. AUSTIN REAVES, G, LAKERS Super-solid role player.

60. TREY MURPHY III, F, PELICANS Breakout coming one of these years.

61. ZACH LAVINE, G, KINGS Reports of his demise were greatly exaggerated.

62. BRANDON MILLER, F, HORNETS He's the good player nobody ever seems to talk about, but now the Hornets might be on the precipice of actually being watchable.

63. TOUMANI CAMARA, F, TRAIL BLAZERS An All-Defensive selection who shoots well from 3-point range and does a little bit of everything? And he's young? Yes, please.

64. CAM THOMAS, G/F, NETS Scoring behemoth. Someone's gotta do it.

65. DONOVAN CLINGAN, C, TRAIL BLAZERS Have you seen his per-36 numbers? Hubba hubba. We'll talk about him more in the sleepers section.

66. JALEN SUGGS, G, MAGIC He's the heartbeat of a Magic team that has Finals hopes.

67. D'ANGELO RUSSELL, G, MAVERICKS He's going to be a steal of a pick until Kyrie Irving returns. Consider shipping him in December when his stock's super high.

68. NIKOLA VUČEVIĆ, C, BULLS Vooch is getting older, hence why he has slipped from the 40s to the 60s in the rankings. Chicago's success has hinged partly on him being less of a focal point.

69. COBY WHITE, G, BULLS Still so lacking defensively, and Giddey sticking around means that his usage will continue to suffer.

70. MALIK MONK, G, KINGS Such a pure scorer.

71. IVICA ZUBAC, C, CLIPPERS What a year he had in '24-25. Lots of new faces in L.A. now, so regression could be coming.

72. KEL'EL WARE, F/C, HEAT Massive upside. When has a guy this promising faded into obscurity in Miami? Erik Spoelstra could make him a star.

73. MILES BRIDGES, F, HORNETS Can't see the addition of Kon Knueppel as a big plus for Miles. Plus, can we trust his character? Still, he's pretty good.

74. MARK WILLIAMS, C, SUNS Easy to love, easier to hate. His value depends on his availability.

75. ISAIAH HARTENSTEIN, C, THUNDER He's good, but he's far from the top-50 guy people thought he might end up being.

76. AUSAR THOMPSON, F, PISTONS He makes an appearance in our breakouts section.

77. NIC CLAXTON, C, NETS Blocks and FG% were down last year, and so were his minutes. Makes him a risky pick.

78. CHRISTIAN BRAUN, G/F, NUGGETS Better in real life than fantasy, and both Cameron Johnson and Bruce Brown will take some opportunities from him.

79. JOHN COLLINS, F/C, CLIPPERS If the Clippers succeed, he will be a major reason why.

80. JOSH HART, G/F, KNICKS There's just no way Hart continues to see the minutes he has seen over the past couple years. He's still a great rebounder and a plus passer and defender, though.

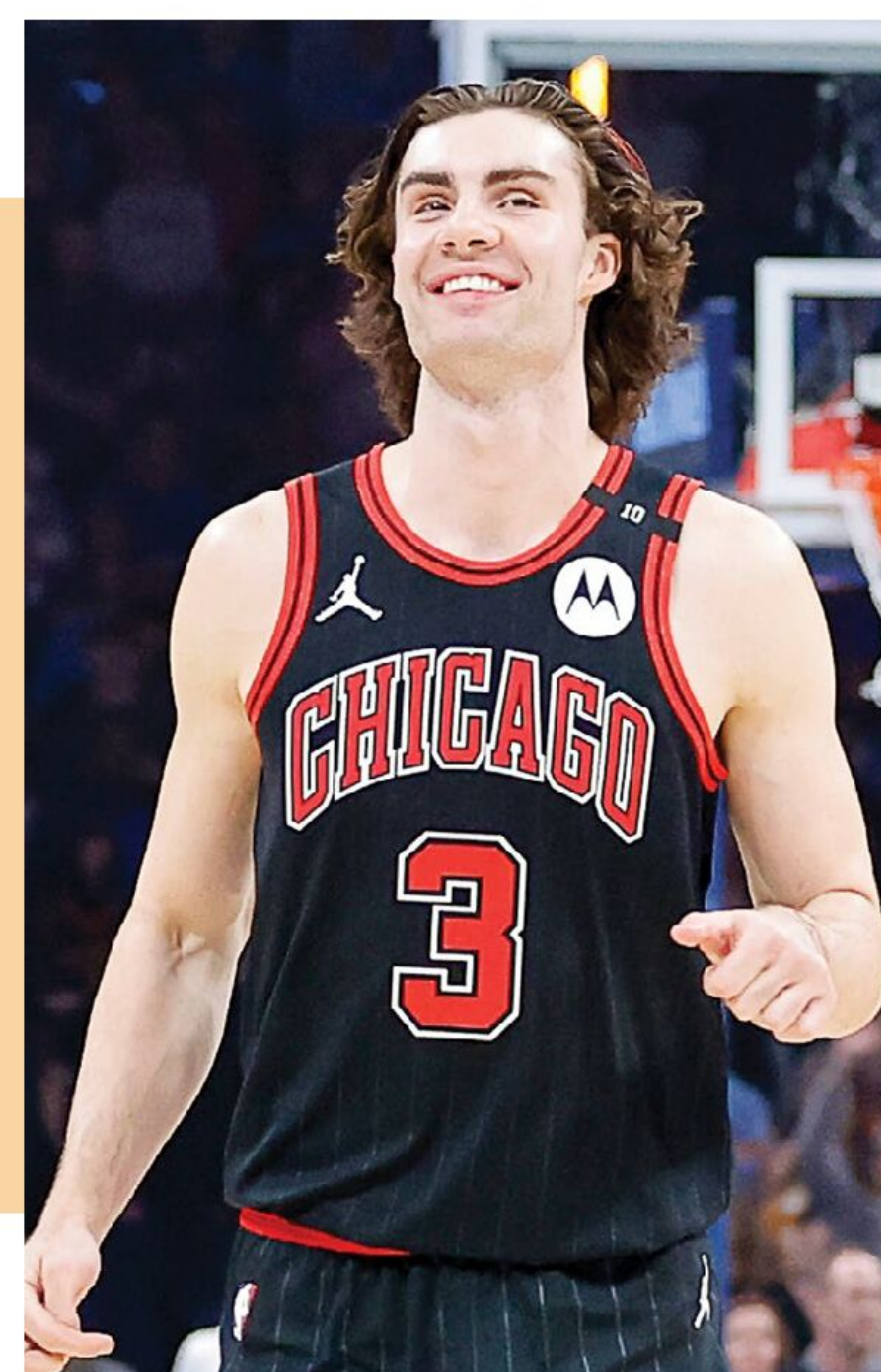
81. Cameron Johnson, F, Nuggets
82. Jakob Poeltl, C, Raptors
83. Payton Pritchard, G, Celtics
84. Andrew Nembhard, G, Pacers
85. Jordan Poole, G, Pelicans
86. Alex Sarr, C, Wizards
87. Brandon Ingram, G/F, Raptors
88. Naz Reid, F/C, Timberwolves
89. Kristaps Porziņģis, F/C, Hawks
90. Michael Porter Jr., F, Nets
91. Norman Powell, G/F, Heat
92. Devin Vassell, G/F, Spurs
93. Kevin Porter Jr., G, Bucks
94. Anfernee Simons, G, Celtics
95. Mikal Bridges, F, Knicks
96. Onyeka Okongwu, C, Hawks
97. Deandre Ayton, C, Lakers
98. Jabari Smith Jr., F/C, Rockets
99. Zach Edey, C, Grizzlies
100. Kon Knueppel, F, Hornets
101. Scoot Henderson, G, Trail Blazers
102. Julius Randle, F/C, Timberwolves
103. Aaron Gordon, F/C, Nuggets
104. Egor Dēmin, G, Nets
105. Rudy Gobert, C, Timberwolves
106. Herbert Jones, F, Pelicans
107. Jalen Green, G, Suns
108. Jaden McDaniels, F, Timberwolves
109. Dereck Lively II, C, Mavericks
110. Tobias Harris, F, Pistons
111. Stephon Castle, G, Spurs
112. Jaylen Wells, G/F, Grizzlies
113. P.J. Washington, F, Mavericks
114. Keegan Murray, F, Kings
115. Brandin Podziemski, G, Warriors
116. Keyonte George, G, Jazz
117. Bradley Beal, G/F, Clippers
118. CJ McCollum, G, Wizards
119. Alex Caruso, G/F, Thunder
120. VJ Edgecombe, G, 76ers
121. Jrue Holiday, G, Trail Blazers
122. Matas Buzelis, F, Bulls
123. Bilal Coulibaly, G/F, Wizards
124. RJ Barrett, F, Raptors
125. Jonathan Kuminga, F, Warriors
126. Draymond Green, F/C, Warriors
127. Collin Sexton, G, Hornets
128. Tyus Jones, G, Magic
129. Jaden Ivey, G, Pistons
130. Yves Missi, C, Pelicans
131. Brook Lopez, C, Clippers
132. Andrew Wiggins, G/F, Heat
133. Benedict Mathurin, G/F, Pacers
134. Cam Whitmore, F, Wizards
135. Donte DiVincenzo, G, Timberwolves
136. Ryan Kalkbrenner, C, Hornets
137. Dennis Schröder, G, Kings
138. Shaedon Sharpe, G/F, Trail Blazers
139. Chris Paul, G, Clippers
140. Bobby Portis, F/C, Bucks
141. Daniel Gafford, C, Mavericks
142. Quentin Grimes, G/F, 76ers
143. Jay Huff, C, Pacers
144. Dylan Harper, G, Spurs

SLEEPERS, BREAKOUTS AND BUSTS

SLEEPERS

DERRICK WHITE, G, CELTICS It may feel a bit silly calling White a sleeper at this point, but he could go from top role player in the NBA to breakout All-Star. He averaged 16.4 points, 4.5 rebounds, 4.8 assists, a block and a steal per game last season while maintaining solid shooting percentages (44/38/84). Now, his usage should jump considerably with Jayson Tatum out all season and Jrue Holiday, Kristaps Porziņģis and Al Horford all gone. Best yet, DWhite has played in 94 percent of Boston's regular-season games over the past three years. We can't imagine letting him slip beyond pick No. 30.

JOSH GIDDEY, G, BULLS Another guy who should be obvious but might be overlooked in certain drafts, Giddey broke out even more than we expected in 2024-25. He wound up averaging a triple-double over the final month of the season, nearly propelling the previously pathetic Bulls to the playoffs. With his confidence through the roof in Chicago, Giddey averaged 14.6 points per game while reaching career highs in rebounds (8.1), assists (7.2), steals (1.2) and 3-point percentage (37.8%). Pass on him in the third or fourth round at your own risk.



JOHN COLLINS, F/C, CLIPPERS There's a distinct chance the Clippers are very good this season, and Collins might be one of the most under-the-radar reasons why. He's the best rebounder on the roster outside of Ivica Zubac, and his elite shooting will help stretch the floor for James Harden, Kawhi Leonard and Chris Paul. If you watched the Jazz last season (there's gotta be a few of you), you know Collins averaged 19 points, 8.2 rebounds, a steal and a block per game and had shooting splits of 52.7/39.9/84.8. The PPG will go down, but so will his turnover rate now that he has a better support system.

TOUMANI CAMARA, F, AND DONOVAN CLINGAN, C, TRAIL BLAZERS A Portland doubleshot!? What!? Hey, players on bad teams can be overlooked and thus turn into massive values. The always-dependable Camara benefited greatly from every Anfernee Simons absence last season, and now Simons' departure to Boston opens things up for the Belgian in his age-25 campaign in Rip City. We'll take an All-Defensive selection who shoots 37.5% from 3 and averages 12.5 points, 6.4 rebounds, 2.5 assists, 1.6 steals and 0.7 blocks per 36 minutes. Speaking of per-36 stats, check out Clingan's last season: 11.9 points, 14.3 rebounds, 2.1 assists, 3.0 blocks, 0.9 steals. If he can stay healthy and out of foul trouble, the former UConn standout could easily flirt with rebounding and block titles.

Other top sleepers: Amen Thompson, G/F, Rockets; OG Anunoby, F, Knicks; Onyeka Okongwu, C, Hawks; Naz Reid, F/C, Timberwolves; Immanuel Quickley, G, Raptors; Jalen Suggs, G, Magic; Walker Kessler, C, Jazz; P.J. Washington, F, Mavericks

BREAKOUTS

DENI AVDIJA, F, TRAIL BLAZERS Perhaps my favorite of the "my guy" candidates so far this offseason, Avdija has a chance to become a household name in 2025-26. Just look at what the Israeli native averaged in his final 16 games of last season: 25 points, 10.6 rebounds, 5.5 assists, 2.8 3-pointers and a steal while shooting 50.8/43.1/81.6. That's not just a top-100 player — that's a star in the making. Don't expect Avdija to extrapolate that into a full season, but also don't be surprised if the 24-year-old finishes this season yielding top 50-75 value.

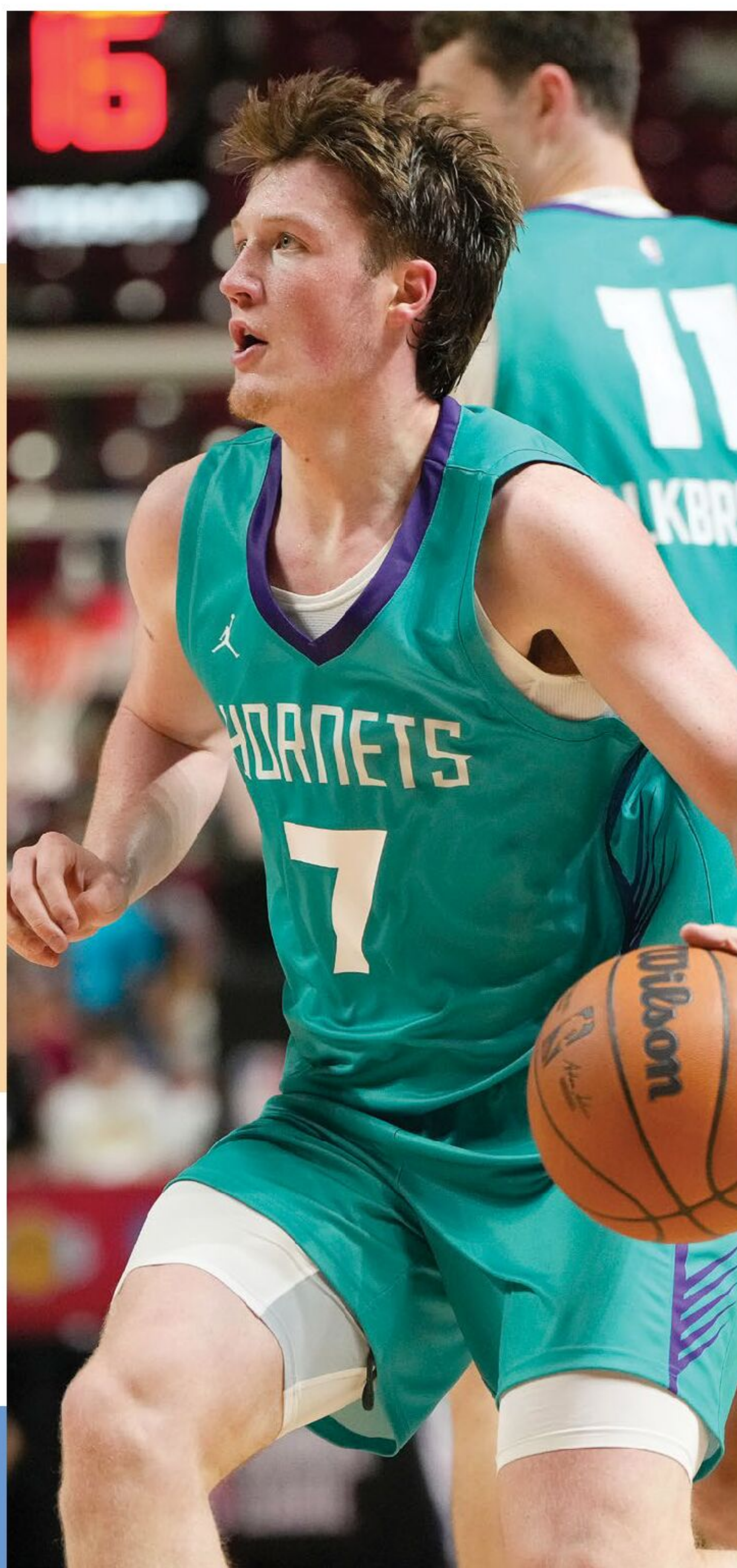
AUSAR THOMPSON, F, PISTONS Thompson excels at many things but often gets overlooked because he's not a strong shooter. If your roster-building centers around ancillary stats, look no further than the 22-year-old's per-36 numbers last season: 16.1 points, 8.2 rebounds, 3.6 assists, 2.7 steals and 1.1 blocks. Early-career Kawhi Leonard, anybody? Thompson bulked up in the offseason, and he's the best perimeter defender on his team (and maybe in all of the Eastern Conference). Enjoy the steal as the minutes start to increase for this rising young star.

ANDREW NEMBHARD, G, PACERS The 25-year-old hit some humongous shots during Indy's epic run to the NBA Finals. Now he gets the chance to be the Pacers' starting point guard and main catalyst with Tyrese Haliburton out for the season. Worried about his 29.1% 3-point shooting last season? Take a closer look and realize he shot 40-of-86 from deep in the postseason. Consider taking Nembhard a round earlier than his ADP, or you might be kicking yourself in a few months.

KEL'EL WARE, F/C, HEAT Ware flew a bit under the radar last season (as did most of the Heat), but he ultimately made second-team All-Rookie despite averaging just 22.2 minutes per game. If his minutes rise by even six minutes per game — and they absolutely should — the Heat big will yield big-time value. We're talking a double-double average with 1.5 blocks, a steal and a .550 shooting percentage with plenty of potential outside the 3-point arc.

KON KNUEPPEL, F, HORNETS Rookies can be breakouts, too! While everyone seems to be focused on Cooper Flagg in the first few rounds, we're targeting Knueppel as a late-draft steal. The 6-5 wingman won Summer League Finals MVP after leading Charlotte on an undefeated tournament run in Sin City, finishing with averages of 15.6 points, 4.8 rebounds and 3.8 assists per game. The Duke standout, who shot 40.6% from 3-point land last year, might be the guy who finally helps LaMelo Ball and the Hornets get somewhere.

Other breakout candidates: Cooper Flagg, F, Mavericks (had to!); Jalen Duren, C, Pistons; Matas Buzelis, F, Bulls; Kevin Porter Jr. and Cole Anthony, G, Bucks; Jabari Smith Jr., F, Rockets



BUSTS

JALEN GREEN, G, SUNS Green might have been the most cataclysmic offensive failure of the 2025 NBA Playoffs. His punishment: getting dealt to Phoenix to compete with Devin Booker for touches. Some fans in the Valley might see hope in this Suns team, but that's just a mirage in the vast Sonoran Desert. Green won't thrive here — he's too streaky and far too ball-dependent. His current fantasy appeal resembles Jordan Poole in his waning days with Golden State.

MIKAL BRIDGES, F, KNICKS The defensive counting stats have regressed. He's barely even the third scoring option on his team. His minutes should go down now that Tom Thibodeau has departed, and the lower-tier guys rarely rack up gaudy stats in a Mike Brown offense. Even if he stays the most durable man in pro hoops, his 17.6/3.2/3.7 averages don't come close to justifying his ADP. Let someone else navigate the headache.

RUDY GOBERT, C, TIMBERWOLVES The Stifle Tower ain't exactly stifling. He finished last season with his lowest per-game scoring average (12.0) in a decade and his worst rebounding output (10.9) since 2017-18. Worse yet, he averaged only 1.4 blocks for the second time in three seasons. How can you stomach drafting a 67.4% free-throw shooter who's never made a 3-pointer when he's not dominating the big-man stats?

DEANDRE AYTON, F/C, LAKERS The Lakers buzz seems to be clouding some fantasy managers' judgment, because Ayton's ADP was 83.3 in mid-August. How can anyone trust this guy enough to draft him in the seventh round? He's soft, he's always injured and he's not the highly effective pick-and-roll man or lob threat Luka Dončić and LeBron James need. This was a bust of an acquisition, and DA's a bust of a 2025 fantasy pick.

MICHAEL PORTER JR., F, NETS MPJ without Nikola Jokić was bad in Denver. MPJ in Brooklyn is going to be terrible. He's not a playmaker or shot-creator, and he's not a good enough defender to help with steals and blocks. And 76.8% from the line last year? Good grief. Eighteen points, seven rebounds and 2.5 treys per game used to make for a high-value fantasy asset. It's a pretty unremarkable baseline at this point.

Other bust candidates: Paul George, G/F, and Joel Embiid, C, 76ers; Ja Morant, G, Grizzlies; Draymond Green, F, Warriors; Coby White, G, Bulls; Kristaps Porziņģis, F/C, Hawks

EXPERTS SAY ... 2025-26 FANTASY ANALYST SURVEY

We surveyed 16 of the brightest and most popular fantasy basketball analysts in the world, picking their brains with multiple-choice and open-ended questions about their top draft targets, core objectives and strategies, favorite writers and podcasts, 2025-26 NBA predictions and more.

Here's our panel of contributors, a group that we annually refer to as "the League of Extraordinary Fantasy Analysts":

SLOAN PIVA The Sporting News/
Athlon Sports (@SloanPiva)

ADAM KING FBI Basketball/
Old Man Squad (@Adamking91)

DAN BESBRIS Old Man Squad
(@DanBesbris)

DAN TITUS Yahoo (@DanTitus)

JOSH LLOYD Basketball Monster/
Locked On Fantasy Basketball
(@RedRock_bball)

KYLE IRVING Underdog NBA
(@KyleIrv_)

MATTY G Bleav in Fantasy/Old Man
Squad (@NBAGeeWhiz)

NOAH RUBIN Rotoworld/Old Man
Squad (@NoahRubin22)

PAPI ROI Fantasy Basketball PH
(@NBAFantasyPapi)

RAPHIELLE JOHNSON Rotoworld
(@raphiellej.bsky.social↑)

RHETT BAUER Roundball Rhetoric
(@Rhett_Bauer)

ROBBIN MARX Bleav In Fantasy
Basketball (@BleavinFantasy)

SCOTT KELLER WillSlamBeer
(@DetSkeller)

STAN SON The Athletic/DraftKings
(@Stan_Son)

STEVE ST-PIERRE Menace Podmen
(@podcast_pierre)

ZACH REIFSCHNEIDER Dizzle Dynasty
(@DizzleDynasty)

WHICH PLAYER DO YOU
LOVE IN OR AROUND THE
SECOND ROUND OF THIS
YEAR'S DRAFTS?

DEVIN BOOKER 25%

JALEN WILLIAMS 20%

JALEN JOHNSON 10%

TYRESE MAXEY 10%

STEPHEN CURRY 10%

DOMANTAS
SABONIS 5%

EVAN
MOBLEY 5%

CHET
HOLMGREN 5%

ANTHONY
EDWARDS 5%

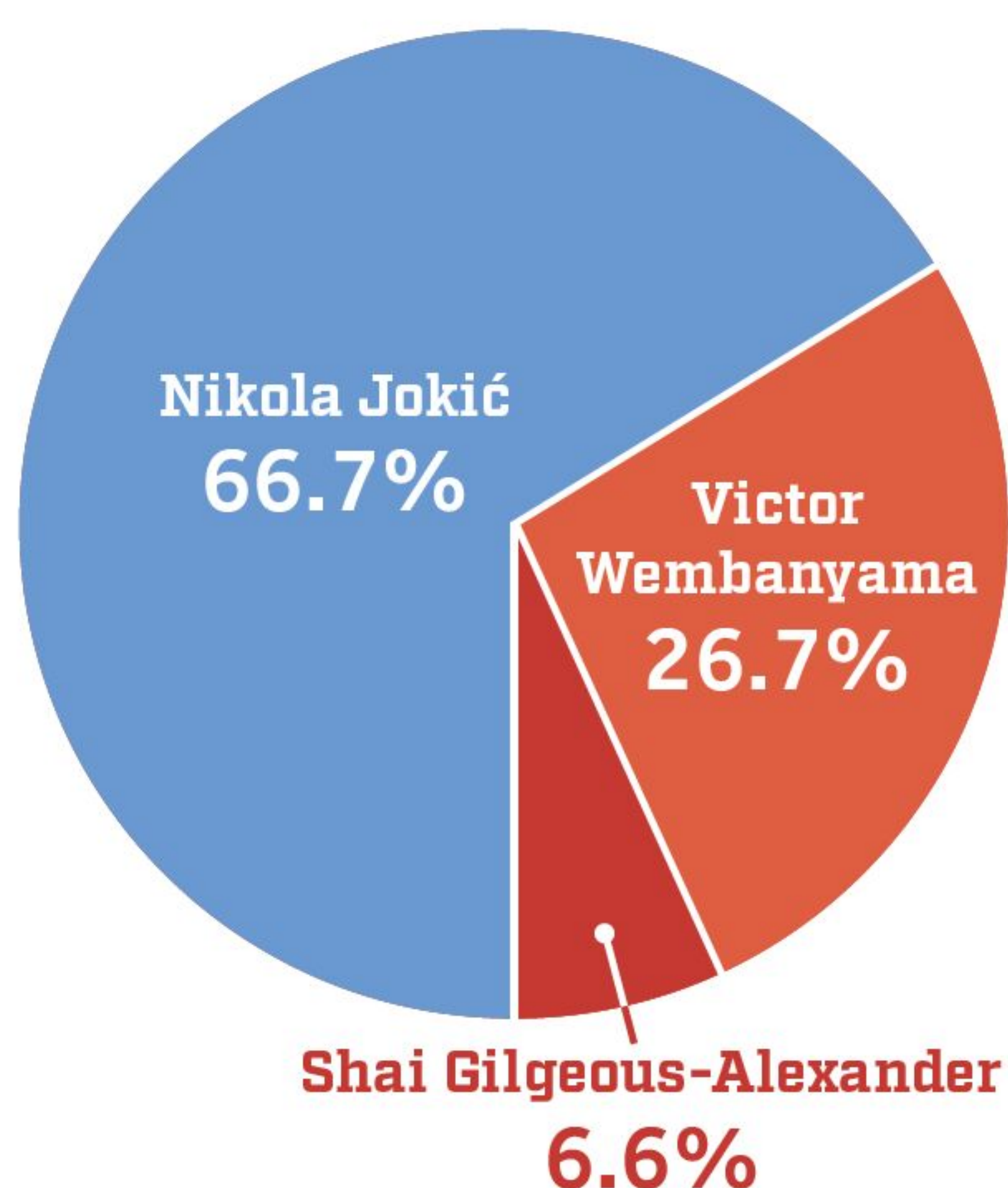
PAOLO
BANCHERO 5%

JAMES
HARDEN 5%

"This will be the first time since the Bubble that Booker will not have either Chris Paul or Kevin Durant on his team. I'm expecting a ton of usage and even more production out of him."

— NOAH RUBIN

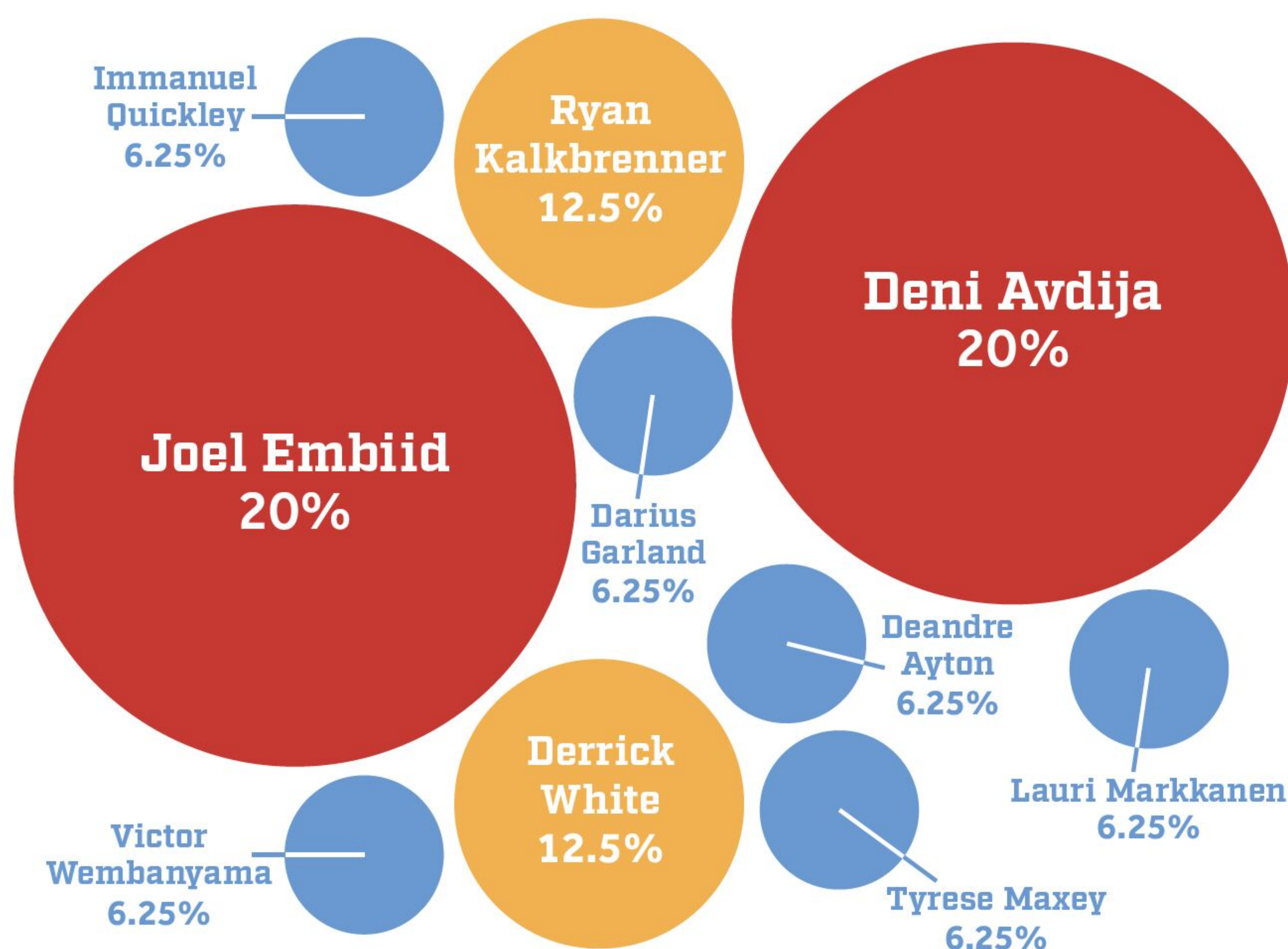
WHO ARE YOU SELECTING
IF YOU LAND THE 1ST
OVERALL PICK IN A
BIG-MONEY LEAGUE
DRAFT?



"Nikola Jokić finished top five in points, rebounds, assists and steals last season with elite efficiency. What else can you ask for?"

— KYLE IRVING

WHO'S YOUR "MY GUY" — THE PLAYER YOU SEEM
TO BE TARGETING IN THE MOST DRAFTS?



BREAKOUT: WHICH PLAYER WILL MAKE THE BIGGEST YEAR-TO-YEAR FANTASY LEAP?

17.5%
ANDREW NEMBHARD

11.7%
KEVIN PORTER JR.

5.9%
ISAIAH JACKSON
COLE ANTHONY
BRANDIN PODZIEMSKI
BRANDON MILLER
VICTOR WEMBANYAMA
SCOOT HENDERSON
MATAS BUZELIS
BENNEDICT MATHURIN
KEL'EL WARE
PAOLO BANCHERO
CADE CUNNINGHAM
DENI AVDIJA

YOU CAN QUOTE ME ON THAT

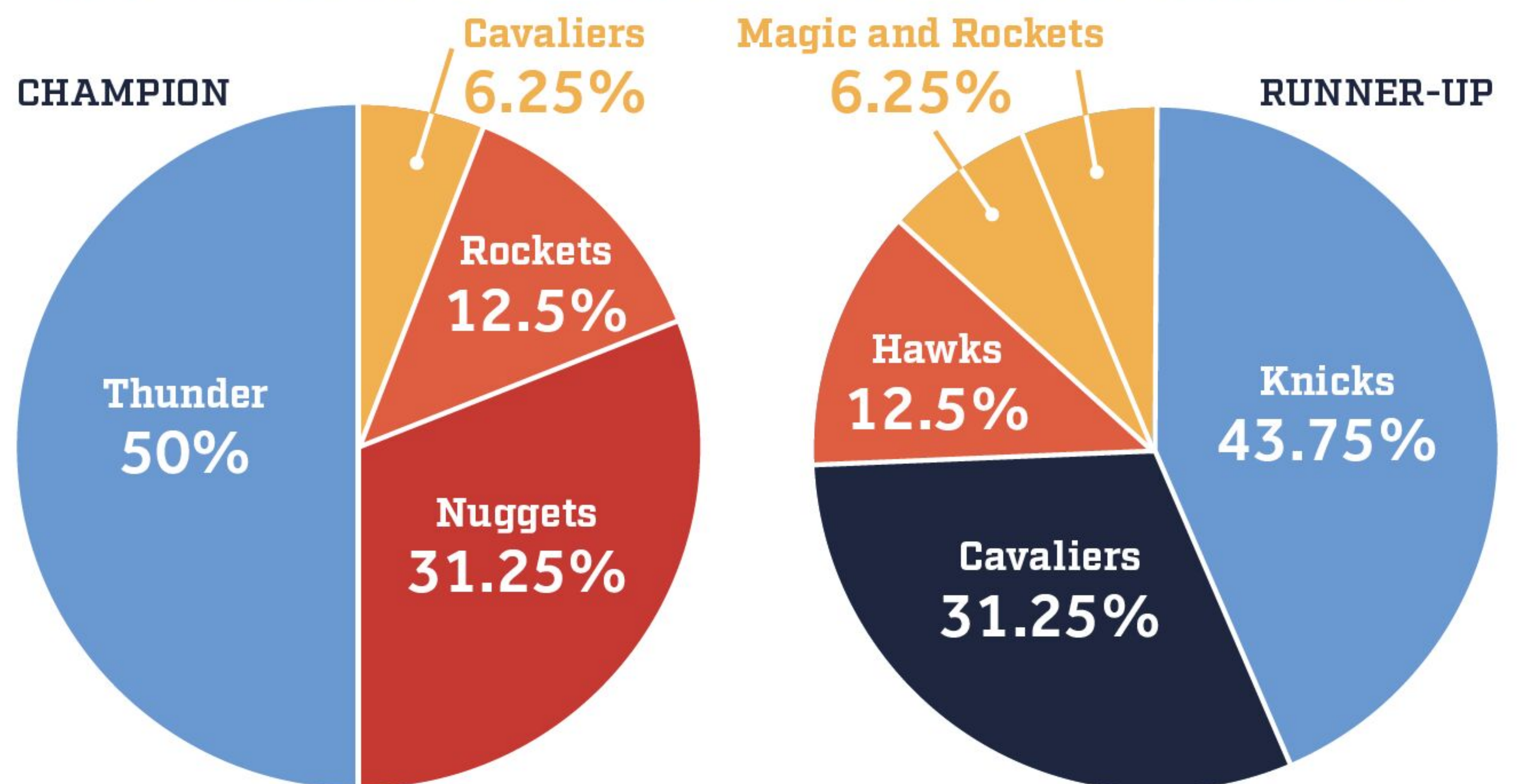
"Cade Cunningham averaged 26 points and nine assists per game last year. I look forward to him taking another leap and expect an increase in several categories. He may have a top-five finish in 2025-26."

— ROBBIN MARX

"Cooper Flagg could be a fantasy stud — a contributor across the board. But you're going to have to pay the price for him. And that price is climbing higher than inflation rates."

— MATTY G

WHO WILL BE THE 2026 NBA CHAMPION AND RUNNER-UP?



WHO'S YOUR FAVORITE LATE-ROUND VALUE PICK?

RYAN KALKBRENNER	11.7%
EGOR DĚMIN	11.7%
MOUSSA DIABATÉ	11.7%
NEEMIAS QUETA	11.7%
JAY HUFF	11.7%
ISAIAH JACKSON	11.7%
COLE ANTHONY	11.7%
KEVIN PORTER JR	6%
MITCHELL ROBINSON	6%
BRICE SENSABAUGH	6%

WHICH HIGH-RISK PLAYER DO YOU THINK WILL YIELD THE HIGHEST REWARD TO INVESTORS?

LAMELO BALL	18.75%
JOEL EMBIID	12.5%
KAWHI LEONARD	12.5%
ANTHONY DAVIS	12.5%
ZION WILLIAMSON	12.5%
COOPER FLAGG	12.5%
PAUL GEORGE	6.25%
KEVIN DURANT	6.25%
KEVIN PORTER JR.	6.25%

"If you're gutsy enough to draft Joel Embiid and he plays 50 games, you get first-round value for pennies on the dollar."

— ROBBIN MARX

WHO WILL WIN NBA LEAGUE MVP, DEFENSIVE PLAYER OF THE YEAR AND ROOKIE OF THE YEAR IN 2025-26?

MVP	Luka Dončić	37.5%
	Nikola Jokić	25%
	Shai Gilgeous-Alexander/Victor Wembanyama	12.5%
	Giannis Antetokounmpo/Anthony Edwards	6.25%
DPOY	Victor Wembanyama	75%
	Dyson Daniels	12.5%
	Anthony Davis/Evan Mobley	6.25%
ROY	Cooper Flagg	87.5%
	VJ Edgecombe/Dylan Harper	6.25%

EXCLUDING YOUR OWN, WHAT'S YOUR FAVORITE FANTASY HOOPS PODCAST, WRITER, OR WEBSITE?

PODCAST	SITE/BLOG
Old Man Squad	Basketball Monster
Locked On Fantasy Basketball	Hashtag
Stuff It	Yahoo
Young Man Squad	Dizzle Dynasty
Menace Podmen	Rotowire
Between Two Hoops	Rotoworld
Fantasy Basketball International	Elite
Elite Fantasy Basketball	The Sporting News
Rotowire	Underdog
Rotoworld	FBI
What's your preferred site/app for playing fantasy basketball?	
Yahoo	The Athletic
Fantrax	Rotoballer
ESPN	Angle
NFBKC	Last Word on Sports

LATE-DRAFT VALUES

The majority of fantasy basketball cheat sheets and podcasts seem only to shine a light on the biggest names in the game. But you can't stop trying to acquire value even after the All-Stars have been gobbled up in your draft. Oftentimes, leagues are won or lost in the later stages of drafts — as well as during the season via savvy free-agent pickups and trade acquisitions.

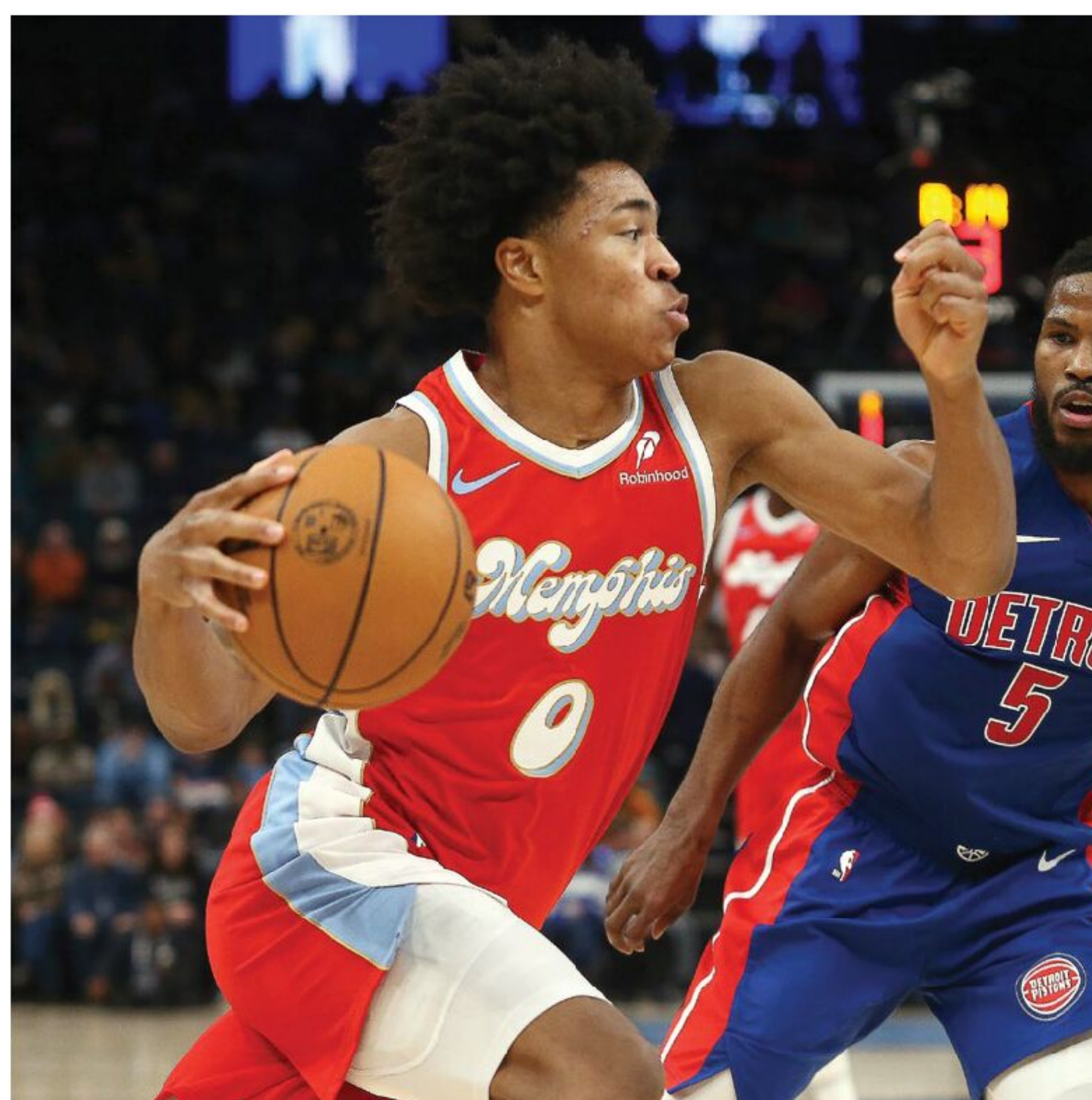
With the NBA continuing to rise in popularity and fan knowledge of the player universe seemingly stronger than ever, larger leagues and deeper drafts have become commonplace. It's never been more imperative for managers to locate the diamonds in the rough in the later rounds.

Here are some of our favorite late-round value picks, all of whom typically got drafted in the 100-200 range in late-summer mocks.

EGOR DĚMIN, G, NETS If you're a Nets fan, we're sorry for your losses. But at least you have an exciting young rookie with upside akin to the Bulls' Josh Giddey. At 6-foot-9, 200, DĚmin has size, athleticism, playmaking ability and a pretty solid shooting stroke. The Russian should be the starting point guard in Brooklyn from Day 1, and we're here for it.



JAYLEN WELLS, G/F, GRIZZLIES Wells finished third in Rookie of the Year voting last season, and he should see an uptick in usage with Desmond Bane in Orlando. None of his stats jump off the page, but he's a solid shooter from 3-point land (35.2%) and the free-throw line (82.2%), he's young (22), he has good basketball instincts and he played 79 games last year.



RYAN KALKBRENNER, F/C, HORNETS He doesn't look or sound like your average NBA player in 2025, but Kalkbrenner has already established himself as a high-upside guy. He's a young leader who can anchor Charles Lee's defense and make some clutch shots, as evidenced by his performance in the Hornets' first-ever Summer League championship. The rookie won the Kareem Abdul-Jabbar Center of the Year and Defensive Player of the Year awards last year as a Creighton big — he could easily win the starting center job over journeyman Mason Plumlee.



AARON GORDON, F/C, NUGGETS — Gordon dealt with calf and hamstring injuries last year, the former of which caused him to miss 31 regular-season games and limited his counting stats. What we did see when he played was a guy who had improved his shooting efficiency, with career highs from 3-point range (43.6%) and the line (81%). If he's healthy this year — with his inside/outside scoring ability and his defensive and rebounding punch — he will be a huge bargain in the later rounds.



KYSHAWN GEORGE, G, WIZARDS — George has a good opportunity to start for the Wizards this season, as he established himself as a strong perimeter defender and underrated floor general in his rookie year. Over his last three months of '24-25, he averaged 10.7 points, 5.1 rebounds and 2.9 assists per game while shooting 38.6% from 3-point land. He's a stud in the making, but many won't even look his way because he plays in DC.

OTHER LATE-DRAFT VALUE PICKS:

Kyle Filipowski, F/C, Jazz; Zaccharie Risacher, F, Hawks; Kevin Porter Jr., G, Bucks; Davion Mitchell, G, Heat; Neemias Queta, C, Celtics; Khaman Maluach, F/C, Suns; Cole Anthony, G, Bucks

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: ALONZO ADAMS-IMAGN IMAGES; SCOTT KINSEY-IMAGN IMAGES; CANDICE WARD-IMAGN IMAGES; PETRE THOMAS-IMAGN IMAGES; BRAD PENNER-IMAGN IMAGES

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CALLING ALL WHISKEY LOVERS



From bourbon to Scotch to Japanese whisky, it's a spirited world—and it keeps getting bigger. Whether you're just a burgeoning fan or have a well-stocked bar, **Men's Journal** is here to help you find your perfect dram.

This fall, we're launching our own curated **Whiskey Shop**, which will feature everything from everyday pours to exclusive single barrels.

Sign up for our Whiskey Wednesday newsletter for updates—and to receive our experts' favorite new bottles to buy, the classics we're obsessing over, and the underrated releases to check out.



MEN'S JOURNAL

CHEERS!